

Earl of the North

A Work of Fan-Fiction

by:

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Prologue

North's heir shall be taken to his dominion

Where his heritage will manifest itself.

The long forgotten power will wake

And Ice's armies will flock to him.

Traitors will quail before the betrayed

And will be reckoned with.

Voldemort's fate will be decided

by he who holds the Black Rod.

Chapter #1

Lucius Malfoy picked Harry Potter's wand up from the wet street as its owner took deep breaths to prevent himself from collapsing from magical exhaustion. He then muttered a long winded incantation and waved it at the Muggle households that surrounded them. They all burst into uncontrollable flames.

Malfoy smirked as Harry collapsed and then dropped the wand in front of the teenage boy. He then drew his own wand and cast a

Charm that erased any presence of his own magical signature. Hopefully his Master's signature would be mistaken for Potter's.

His malicious work done, Malfoy went to the fallen form of Voldemort and prepared a Portkey. The Dark Lord would survive, but it had been close. He then said the word to activate the Portkey as he grasped his Master's cloak. "Impossible."

Harry James Potter was left lying in the street as Privet Drive burned and countless Muggles perished in flames and smoke that had been caused by his wand.

"I didn't do it." Harry said, his voice showing how close he was to tears. "There's no reason for me to kill innocent Muggles." He was bound to a hard chair in an office deep beneath the Ministry of Magic.

"That's why it's illegal." the Ministry agent said snidely. She had wasted no time in letting Harry know that she and everyone else despised him.

"I'm innocent!"

Dumbledore looked at Harry sadly. "We tested your wand, you were the one who cast that spell, Harry." He held up his hand to prevent Harry from interrupting. "There are witnesses that say you had a big fight with the late Dursleys on that same day."

"I've always fought with them!" Harry yelled. "I've never hurt them! I swear that it was Voldemort and Malfoy! They appeared out of nowhere and I nearly killed Voldemort. Malfoy must have done it!"

"Tests indicate that you were the only magical person to even be in the vicinity of Privet Drive since you came home for the Holidays." the woman said.

"I and the rest of the Order suspected that you may have allied with the Dark. Even Snape. You knew about attacks long before he did." Dumbledore said morosely. "How else would you have gotten all that information without having your dreams?"

Harry was now getting angry. Why wouldn't they listen? "I told you! After I got home for the summer after fifth year, I kept getting short letters telling me where attacks would be. I simply passed on the information to you."

"Who where they from?"

"I don't know!"

"Why didn't you warn us about the attack on Hogsmeade? Hundreds died." Dumbledore questioned.

"The person stopped writing letters to me." Harry explained desperately.

The woman who had not even identified herself shook her head grimly as she made some notations in what Harry assumed to be his permanent record. "I think you were trying to give everyone a false sense of security. Your warning prevented minor attacks and filled Azkaban with rookie Death Eaters, but they were hardly significant."

"As if Voldemort did anything significant since June." Harry muttered.

The woman flipped the folder shut. "All of the evidence is against you. You had a fight with the Dursley's. These mysterious letters. Your wand initiated the spell. You are the only wizard or witch to have stepped foot on that street."

Instead of trying to defend himself, Harry looked at the situation logically. The evidence was more than damning. He couldn't prove any of it wrong unless . . . "Veritaserum! I'll take a dose and tell you that I'm innocent."

"Too expensive and pointless. This is an open shut case, Potter. I hope you enjoy rotting in Azkaban." The woman sneered at him. "Traitor."

"But . . . a trial!"

"No time." She appealed to Dumbledore. "You can see that this is solid. He obviously did it. There's not much point of making more trouble over this."

"Yes, Whitney. I have to agree." He gave Harry an extremely disappointed look. "Normally I wouldn't dare put him in Azkaban, not matter what he did, what with Voldemort about. Things have changed though . . . there's a new prophecy."

"That settles it then. Life in Azkaban. No parole."

This silenced Harry and he watched Dumbledore snap his wand. What would happen to the rest of his possessions? 'Stupid thing to be wondering about.' Harry concluded.

The boat ride across the channel to Azkaban was extremely depressing for Harry. He couldn't stop thinking about what Dumbledore said. 'Did they really think I had gone to the Dark? All that time?' Harry thought. They must have. Ron and Hermione had been acting strange the whole year. Harry thought that he had been mistaken, but they had appeared relieved when he announced he would be spending the holidays alone.

As the fortress loomed closer through the dark fog, Harry came to the conclusion that he couldn't really blame the people who had turned against him based on the facts. But the Ministry could have given him a proper trial with Veritaserum and those who had known him for so long should have believed in him. He gathered his resolve for the hardship he would soon face. Getting mad about it wouldn't solve anything though.

Harry looked at Azkaban as the boat came to rest next to the stone pillared dock. Harry noted absently that it had been artfully carved from solid rock. The figures that were on the pillar were faded with age, but Harry thought that some of them looked vaguely like birds.

One of the Aurors roughly grabbed him and led him towards the dock. The other Auror, who had a much nicer disposition, had noticed Harry looking at the pillars. "Some say that those were carved long before there was a prison here." He said informatively.

'Like it matters to me.' Harry thought with apathy. When he stepped onto the island, Harry felt a jolt of power shake him slightly. He quickly looked at his escort to see if they had noticed it. They did not appear to have noticed anything strange. 'Must be the wards.' Harry decided.

They led him into the prison where the Dementors were. It was amazing that any of them remained now that Voldemort was out and about. Not many though, their effects weren't bothering Harry very much at all. His thoughts on this subject were interrupted when they stopped walking and the friendly auror unlocked a cell door. The hostile one shoved Harry into the cell and sneered. "Merry Christmas Potter!"

Because his hands were shackled, Harry was unable to break his fall and he scraped an arm on the ground as the door slammed shut. "And a Happy New Year." he muttered sarcastically. He stood up to survey his surroundings.

The cell was quite small and was windowless. The only opening other than the closed door was a small hole in the corner which Harry assumed served as a toilet. The thing that startled him was that he was not alone. Another inmate was huddled in a dark corner that the light from the barred cell door opening didn't touch.

Harry decided to be social, even though the other inmate was quite likely insane. He stepped towards his cell mate and took a good look that left him reeling in shock. "Bellatrix Lestrange!"

Bellatrix raised her head and her moist and slightly-dead violet eyes met his. "Black actually. My husband divorced me." She sighed and returned to gazing at nothing in particular on the floor.

"Why?"

"Because I betrayed V-V-Voldemort." she whispered. "I wasn't killed because they thought it would be amusing for me to rot in this hell-hole. Didn't stop them from torturing me though."

To say that Harry was stunned would be an understatement. Why would she betray Voldemort and how had she ended up here without it being all over the newspapers? The second answer was actually quite easy really. Fudge would not want to admit that she had escaped in the first place. Any reports that she had escaped could now be dismissed as false.

Harry elected to sit down next to her. He was itching to know how she had betrayed the Dark Lord, but decided that a little sympathy might get him further in the long run. "Crucio?"

A weak snort answered Harry. "That's nothing." Bellatrix turned towards him and pulled the neck of her ratty dress down a bit further to reveal a mass of red-welted lines all over the skin of her upper chest. After Harry had gaped a moment she let go and sat back against the wall. Now that he looked closer, he realized that the numerous stains on her dress must be blood.

"I'm sorry." Harry said sincerely. She may have been a Death Eater who had tortured and killed many, but he couldn't help but feel sympathetic towards her. Besides, if she had betrayed Voldemort, she couldn't be all that bad. "How was it that you betrayed him?"

She looked at Harry with a bit of a smile. "I sent you all those letters."

"Why did you do that?"

Bellatrix sighed deeply. "I was trying to make up for my crimes. Fifteen years in Azkaban changed my outlook on life. I rue the day that I decided to become a Death Eater. When V-Voldemort broke me out I had no choice but to follow." She stopped and looked away from Harry. "I'm sorry about Sirius." she said quietly. "I tried to stun him. I didn't know that he would fall through that thing."

Harry nodded. There was no use in getting angry about it anymore. Sirius was dead and that was that. Besides, it was mostly his fault after all.

Taking Harry's silence as encouragement, Bellatrix turned her head towards Harry continued. "After Sirius died, I realized that I couldn't

pretend anymore. I already suffered from too much guilt. There was no way I could stand by and do nothing. So I started writing you those letters. He caught on after a while though. After being tortured for days, I was turned over discreetly to the Ministry and here I am."

Putting his weak Legillimency skills to the test, Harry looked into Bellatrix's eyes intensely. He was able to feel her emotions for a single moment. He found crushing guilt for her crimes, sorrow, depression, and best of all- no regrets for turning on Voldemort. "I believe you." he said quietly.

This single statement seemed to overjoy her. Perhaps there was hope for her if the Boy-Who-Lived could at least understand her.

There was a long pause before she asked the inevitable question. "What are you doing here?"

Chapter #2

"That's a nice lot of friends you have." Bellatrix commented when Harry finished telling her the events of the past twenty-four hours that had led to his incarceration. Too say the least, she was horrified, but voicing that probably wouldn't do any good. "At least they didn't torture you and all that fun stuff."

Harry's lips quirked. "That's one way to look at it."

The two sat in companionable silence mulling over their own thoughts for a few hours. Harry was just barely considering asking Bellatrix about the normal prisoner routine when she abruptly drew a ragged breath. "What's wrong?"

"The Dementors are coming." she gasped as she slowly slumped sideways from her sitting position to the floor. She instinctively curled up into a ball.

"Oh." Harry instinctively thought of a happy thought, but then realized that without his wand, it would do no good. He also then realized that he couldn't feel anything that he normally associated with the presence of the evil creatures. "Are you sure?"

Before Bellatrix could respond the door opened and two plates of some sort of food were shoved into the cell. Apparently it was the evening meal. The door slammed and within a few seconds, Bellatrix had recovered from her fit. The Dementors must have left..

Harry wasn't thinking about why they hadn't affected him because Bellatrix was staring at him with a confused expression on her face. "Don't they affect you at all?"

"Yes." Harry said nervously. "I usually faint." He stood up, grabbed the two plates, and gave one to Bellatrix before returning to his sitting position next to her.

She dug in, but Harry decided to study the feed before eating. It didn't look like anything he had ever eaten before. It didn't smell particularly good either. "What is this slop?"

“It’s best if you don’t wonder.”

“I don’t think I want to eat it.” Harry said, giving the stuff on the plate a revolted glance.

Bellatrix stopped eating for a moment and gave Harry a very stern glare. “It’s the same every day. Whether or not you want to, you will eventually get used to it. You can get used to it now or later. I suggest now unless you want to suffer more than you have to.” She returned to the pitiful meal.

“Cheers.” Harry muttered.

After they had finished eating, the Dementors returned and took the plates away. Once again, Bellatrix was instantly affected by their powers and Harry did not feel a thing. Harry shrugged it off and thanked his lucky stars. However, Bellatrix who was ever curious, couldn’t help but wonder, so she returned to her favorite corner and pondered silently.

Harry had just discovered that it was possible to scratch impressions on the dark walls and was about to take on an artistic project when Bellatrix finally broke her silence. “The Dementors don’t affect you, and they are somewhat afraid of you.”

Baffled, Harry looked at her. “Afraid of me?”

“Yes, afraid of you.” Bellatrix confirmed. “They almost always loiter near this cell to torment me before or after mealtime. I guess I have more guilty memories than other prisoners. However, they must be afraid of you. But why?”

“Umm, I don’t know.”

She didn’t answer for several moments. Finally she beckoned Harry to come over and sit next to her. Having nothing better to do, Harry complied. She stretched forth one of her hands and gently traced the scar on Harry’s forehead.

Harry shivered slightly as her cool fingers remained on his forehead after she had traced the scar as if she was checking for a fever. He didn't ever remember someone touching him in that way and it made him nervous. Finally she gave a defeated sigh. "It's not that."

"Okay then." Harry said, not quite sure what she was talking about.

"It's a mark that serves as a link, but it isn't associated with power." she muttered absently, unsuccessfully attempting to explain her thoughts to Harry. Before he could ask what she meant, she spoke again. "Roll up your sleeves."

Harry rolled up his long sleeves until they were very close to the shoulder. Bellatrix took his right hand and slowly stroked his arm from the wrist to shoulder. Finding nothing, she took his left hand and did the same.

As her hand got a few inches above the elbow, Harry started. She had touched something and it was making him feel really strange. Bellatrix had also discovered something because she began to trace something on his arm with a finger. "Bingo." she whispered.

Harry craned his neck to see what it was she was talking about. All he could see was some white rune thing on his skin that was glowing brightly. "What is it?"

"A phoenix clutching a lightning bolt with shackled talons. A star.. the North Star is above the phoenix." Bellatrix said in awe.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry was confused, but he thought it looked fairly interesting anyway.

"It's a Warlock rune." Bellatrix explained. "Only the most powerful wizards have them. I don't think there's been a wizard that has had one of these for ages!"

"A shackled phoenix stands for someone with great power?" Harry asked incredulously.

"No, no, no!" Bellatrix said quickly in a slightly annoyed voice. The details of the rune are very personal and apply to each person differently. It's the fact that you have a rune. I suspect that a shackled phoenix signifies that you're a Light wizard, but you've been imprisoned. The lightning bolt is for your scar of course."

"What about the star?"

Bellatrix frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not sure. It's the North Star, so that must be significant. Its technical name is Polaris . . ."

Harry looked at her inquiringly as she raked her brains for any hint of what the star could mean. "It's on the tip of my tongue!" she growled unhappily. I read it somewhere. "A star. . . Polaris." Finally she realized what the star denoted. The thought made her giggle gleefully.

"What is it? Tell me!" Harry pleaded.

She stopped her merriment long enough to answer him. "You're the Lord of Polairix."

While Harry was getting confused and Bellatrix was getting even more excited than ever before, the Order was having a meeting in Grimmauld Place. Their choice of topic was of course Harry's 'crime' and subsequent incarceration.

"I have a hard time believing that Harry would do something like that, Albus." Lupin announced in a menacing voice. Moody and Tonks guiltily nodded in agreement with him. Snape had on a very grim face which signified his concurrence. Dumbledore had deliberately kept Lupin and others uninformed about his suspicions of Harry's Dark activities and then of his arrest.

Albus sighed. He had known that this would not go over very well at all with certain Order members. He once again laid out all of the evidence that pointed to Harry. "Even young Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley have agreed with my suspicions and conclusions." He motioned to them. "Tell them what you told me earlier."

"When term started, Dumbledore asked us to watch Harry for anything suspicious. He has been secretly practicing all sorts of Dark magic this year. When we asked him about it, he got very confrontational." Ron explained to his fellow Order members. (He and Hermione had been allowed to secretly join the previous summer.) "His nightmares have also completely ceased. I think that this is evidence of his joining You-Know-Who."

"The same curse that was used on Privet Drive is in one of his books as well." Hermione piped in to support Ron. "I even recall him studying that book on the Hogwarts Express last week."

There were mixed reactions around the table. Mrs. Weasley was horrified, the twins shook their heads in wonder, Shacklebolt was confused, and Dumbledore looked resigned. Lupin decided to express the opinion that he shared with Tonks, Moody, and surprisingly, Snape. He hissed, "You bloody traitors!"

Hermione had the decency to look embarrassed, Ron only rolled his eyes. "This is a war! Sometimes you just have to cut your losses."

Although Snape disliked Harry, he tried to throw out a wild card in his favor. "And what of the prophecy, Headmaster?" Several people murmured in agreement. "Potter may be guilty as sin, but the prophecy still said that he could destroy Voldemort."

"A new prophecy has been given that I believe invalidates former prophecies." Dumbledore announced. "It states that the heir of the North will be restored to his power and that 'he who holds the Black Rod' will decide Voldemort's fate."

"How does that invalidate anything?" Lupin burst out angrily, getting frustrated at the idiocy that was being displayed at the gathering.

Dumbledore held up his hand to silence Remus. "I have done a great deal of research to shed some light on the things the prophecy references." He glanced around the table at the intrigued Order members. "Until the thirteenth century, many things were different. The Wizarding world had more dominance, especially where the

nobility was concerned. The Lord of Britain was a wizard who, for example, held a great deal of power over the British Isles.”

“What happened to that system?” Hermione asked.

“It eventually dissolved.” Albus stated. “Muggle populations grew and persecuted magical beings. However, one of these dominions had almost no Muggles in it and was comprised of mostly magical creatures and powerful witches and wizards. This province and its associated power remain intact to this very day.”

Ron, who normally shunned history, was intrigued. “Which dominion is that?”

“The Earldom of the North. Although the estate is intact, the line supposedly failed long ago. I believe that the prophecy is referring to that title and that it will soon be inherited. More research has revealed that the Earldom has always belonged to the House of Polairix in the past and that Polairix possesses the Black Rod.” Dumbledore said.

Moody’s hand shot up. “Two questions. What is the Black Rod and what makes you think that young Potter isn’t the Earl of the North?” Remus nodded fiercely in agreement with the aged Auror.

“I examined that possibility already.” Dumbledore countered quietly. “Both James Potter and his father went through a blood-tracing ritual when the Order was doing some experiments several years ago. The Potter family is extremely wealthy and prominent, but they are not descendants of the House of Polairix. Lily, of course, was a Muggle-born.”

“And the Black Rod?” Snape reminded the old man.

Professor Dumbledore shrugged. “Polairix was never very forthcoming about that magical object. I would assume that it is a very fancy wand or something to that effect.”

“So what do we do now?” Mr. Weasley asked.

"I suggest that we ask Severus here to brew some blood tracing potions." Tonks said. "We can then give them to the heads of some of the most prominent families around and hope that the Earl of the North isn't a Slytherin." She then muttered a short sentence to herself. "And maybe one to Harry."

Bellatrix had just finished explaining all she knew about the dominion of Polairix to Harry, which wasn't very much at all. She seemed to have the vague idea that Harry was the lord of some islands in the general vicinity of Azkaban, that he had inherited a lot of power, and that Voldemort would be shaking in his boots if he knew about Harry's new status.

"So why are you so excited about this?" Harry asked her once she had calmed down a bit. "Noble or not, I'm still stuck in this dank fortress for the rest of my life."

"You're the heir to a great amount of power!" Bellatrix told Harry. Her violet eyes were sparkling wildly. "Wandless magic doesn't go very far at all, but you're powerful enough to do a few tricks that could get us out of here."

Harry was distinctly nervous about the whole idea. "Wouldn't the Ministry be a bit unhappy about all that?"

A snort answered Harry. "Of course they would. But once you escape, there is nothing they can do. You can hide easily from them and if they do catch you, you can just inform them of your status. They can't touch you."

"I'm not so sure." Harry said hesitantly.

Harry was startled when she clutched his robe and began to stare at him with pleading eyes. "Please, Harry. Escape and take me with you. I'll be in your debt forever and thus will never leave you, and will do anything you want me to do."

Possible scenarios raced through Harry's mind. The Ministry would certainly be hot on his trial, but he thought that he might be able to dodge them if he lived among the Muggles. If worse came to worse,

he could always do something against Malfoy to prove his innocence. Most of all, what did he have to lose? "All right, we'll do it." he said.

Bellatrix wrapped her arms around Harry hugged him fiercely. Not being an experienced hugger, Harry stiffened for a moment before awkwardly returning the hug. She broke it off with a large smile. "I'll start teaching you everything I know in the morning. Even if I'm not powerful enough to do much without a wand, I can at least tutor you."

Chapter #3

A groan escaped Harry's lips as he awoke on the hard stone floor of the prison cell. It had not done very much at all for his joints. Bellatrix had explained before he fell asleep the previous night that sleeping mats were rare and she preferred the hard floor to the fleas and other creatures that inhabited the mats.

He opened his eyes and found Bellatrix watching him from her standing position above him. Apparently she wanted to get started on his training as soon as possible. Harry was hungry however. "Any breakfast in this joint?" he asked as he sat up and propped himself against the wall.

"In a few hours." she answered. "Meanwhile, there are a few mental exercises that we should get you started on. They are absolutely necessary if you wish to perform some of the special tasks I'll be teaching you. Until you can perform these new talents at a moment's notice, you'll have to do these mental exercises every morning and every night."

Memories of Snape's Occlumency lessons were suddenly prominent in Harry's mind. He shoved them aside owing to the fact that Bellatrix seemed to be much more pleasantly disposed than Snape was. Harry wanted to clear a few things up first though. "Before we began, could you tell me what I'll be learning?"

"Of course." she readily consented. "I have composed a list of certain things that you will find useful when escaping from this island and then after that, for the rest of your life. You'll be learning some wandless flying and hovering charms. These don't last very long, but can save a life. Occlumency and Legillimency naturally. Have you met my niece? I think her name is Nymphadora."

Harry answered affirmatively.

"Good. You'll be learning a simple equivalent to the talent that she possesses. This will help in disguising your appearance for short periods of time. We'll practice Scrying, a handy technique for spying. Shield charms are a must. A few simple wandless charms and spells

and then some extremely valuable invisibility charms and last, but not least, I'll teach you the rare art of 'turning.'"

"Turning?"

"It's a similar spell to that of Apparition. You can only travel up to one hundred feet or so, but it can give you an instant advantage over an enemy in a fight."

"That all sounds useful." Harry said, now catching her excitement as well. "Let's get started then."

She knelt next to him and took the arm with the Warlock rune on it. Before he knew it, her finger was on it and the strange feeling he had experienced the night before returned. "I want you to clear your mind. Don't necessarily ignore your concerns, simply set them aside for now. Focus on the rune and the sensations it is causing. Try to concentrate your power."

Harry closed his eyes and began meditating. Eventually, Harry was able to cast his worry, anger, and fear out of his conscious mind and concentrate on the rune as Bellatrix had instructed him to. He could feel power seeping into his body at an appallingly slow rate. That was probably normal though.

This continued for what seemed to be both an eternity and a moment until a stray thought interrupted Harry. "Would he be able to perform this exercise if no one was touching his rune?" This caused him to worry and his concentration slipped. The power he had felt fled.

He opened his eyes and found his cell mate on the other side of the cell wolfing down what appeared to be breakfast. Apparently she had not been touching his rune for some time. Bellatrix looked up when he moved. "Two hours is amazing for a novice." she commented.

Several weeks later, Snape sneered at the backs of a first-year Potions class as they all hurriedly exited his classroom to escape him and to enjoy their weekend. Not a single one of them had any aptitude for his subject.

The professor was pulled away from his thoughts when Remus Lupin entered the classroom. Apparently his scheduled meeting with the Headmaster was complete. "Why do you want to see me?" the werewolf asked.

"In my office." Snape said as civilly as he could manage.

The two men mad their way towards Snape's office and entered. Before closing the door, Snape made sure that no one was in the general vicinity and then placed several anti-eavesdropping spells around the office.

They both sat down and Snape began. "Albus asked me to brew some extremely large amounts of the Progenic Potion. He intends to administer it to as many prominent family representatives as he can."

Remus winced. "I know, he gave it to several Order members as well. It tastes horrible."

Snape smirked. "Of course it does."

"You were saying."

"I decided to secretly keep a rather large amount of that potion and modified it somewhat. The modified brew specifically searches for the House of Polairix rather than naming any and all houses the drinker is descended from. If anyone of the right descent is found, their hair is supposed to turn silver. They don't even have to be the heir to the House like the original potion requires. They just need to be related." Snape said.

"Are you suggesting that we administer that to Harry or other people Dumbledore hasn't?" Lupin asked carefully.

Snape rolled his eyes. "No. With the help of a house-elf named Dobby, I spiked the drinks and several dishes for multiple meals. Every student in this school has had multiple doses of that potion and none of their heads have silver hair."

Lupin was confused as to what Snape's intentions were. "Why did you do that?"

"Because it's the easy way to test candidates quickly." Snape said impatiently. "All the prominent families of the wizarding world have multiple children that are related to them in Hogwarts. Not one of them reacted to the potion. So I did more research on the House of Polairix and the Earl of the North. The Dark Lord had some interesting tomes in his collection and I believe that I've found the answer."

"What is it?" Lupin asked eagerly.

He watched as Snape stood up and retrieved a large tome from his bookshelf. Snape opened the book to a certain page and set it down in front of Remus. "That is a portrait of the last man to hold the earldom of the North."

A tall man clothed in silver robes stood proudly in the picture. The charms that had made the drawing mobile had worn off, but he still looked as imposing as he must have been when the picture had been made. When Remus noticed the man's eyes, he gasped. "Those are Lily's eyes!"

"Yes, that's what I surmised as well." Snape said. "She must have been a descendent of a squib somewhere along the road."

"We can prove that Harry is the Earl and that all the prophecies are still valid!"

"We can't." Snape said shortly.

"Why not?"

"The potion I used isn't recognized as a valid means by which one's ancestors can be traced. The eyes are just eyes. Anybody can have green eyes." Snape retorted.

"No one has green eyes like that except Harry."

"Not good enough." Snape growled. "Even if Dumbledore and the Ministry believed us, what would happen? They still believe that Potter is guilty of burning down Privet Drive. They would put our 'savior' on a leash. Potter would become even more resentful than he probably already is. The prophecy Dumbledore was talking about stated that 'he who holds the Black Rod will decide Voldemort's fate.' Notice that it doesn't say anything about someone else choosing for him."

"I see." Remus said carefully. "I think that we should secretly put our loyalties towards Harry. Then we can perhaps try to get him out of Azkaban and then help him defeat Voldemort."

Snape nodded grudgingly. It was the same conclusion that he had come to earlier. He didn't enjoy the thought of loyalty to Potter, but it was necessary. "My thoughts exactly. I would appreciate it if you would talk Tonks, Moody, and anyone else sympathetic to Potter's cause. Once we get a fair number of people on board, we can hold a meeting and discuss some options."

Lupin stood up. "I suppose I should probably get onto that right away." He turned to leave but paused. "How about seeing if you can get some students involved? We'll need all the support we can get."

"I'll do that." Snape said. In just a little over two weeks, Snape would get his opportunity.

Neville Longbottom deliberately took his time to put away his supplies after six-year NEWT level Potions. He watched from the corner of his eye and Ron and Hermione quickly cleaned up and left.

Harry Potter had not returned from the Christmas holidays and Neville was worried. Harry's best friends and teachers did not seem to know why he had not returned, nor did they really care. Neville had a sneaking suspicion that something was up. Snape was his last hope. All of the other teachers had put him off.

Gathering his courage, Neville made his way to the front to address Snape. "Sir, I was wondering if I could ask you a question."

The professor looked up from the stack of Potions essays that he was sorting. "What?"

"I was wondering if you could tell me why Harry didn't come back from the holidays, sir."

Neville observed as Snape carefully considered his answer. "Mr. Potter has been sent to Azkaban on a life sentence." he finally responded.

"B-but why!" Neville asked as his eyes widened in shock. "Do Ron and Hermione know?"

"He was framed for the mass murder of several Muggles. As for his friends, yes, they do know his fate. After all, they did testify to everyone that Harry had been practicing the Dark Arts to a large extent."

"That's preposterous!" Neville said vehemently. "Harry would never do that! If he was practicing the Dark Arts, it was only to help educate himself and the members of the DA."

Snape nodded tersely. "That's what several others have concluded. However, we are in the minority. Speaking of DA, what happened to it when Potter didn't return?"

The more Neville thought about the situation, the more outraged he was. "Ron got up at our first meeting and announced that, apparently, Harry was not going to return to Hogwarts and that we needed a new president for the DA. He nominated himself on the grounds that he was Harry's best friend. Hermione backed him up."

"Isn't that interesting?" Snape mused.

"Is there anything that can be done, Professor?" Neville inquired.

"Yes, there is." Snape said, looking around his classroom to make sure no one was listening in. "Some of us are trying to put together a movement in Potter's favor. There's no way that You-Know-Who is

going to be brought down unless it is Potter that does it. You can discreetly get some other students in on it.”

Neville nodded eagerly. “I think that would be quite simple to manage. There’s loads of students that don’t think Ron is a very good DA leader, and who think that foul play must be involved in Harry’s disappearance. What would we do?”

“Mostly keep an open mind and be ready for when Potter gets out of Azkaban, whether it be from being proven innocent or by other means. He’ll need assistance and friends. You might as well train up like you do in DA as well.” Snape advised. “Whatever you do, keep Granger, Weasley, and his sister out of it.”

“Of course. What should we call ourselves?”

Snape’s lips curled into a sardonic grin. “Potter’s Legion.”

On the afternoon of the day before Valentines, Bellatrix Black found herself watching Harry Potter’s sleeping form in their cell. Five weeks of extensive training and meditation had done a lot for Harry. In a matter of seconds, he could now draw in an amount of power that would require days of meditation by any other wizard or witch.

He had also showed an unusual talent for both Legillimency and Scrying and had invented a method to combine them for very profitable results. Bellatrix unconsciously shivered when she remembered him prying into her mind. Fortunately, she had managed to hide some of her more embarrassing thoughts from him, most of which happened to feature him.

His eagerness to learn had doubled when he spied on his two old friends with his Scrying talent. Apparently they too had betrayed him, perhaps even more than Dumbledore had. Mostly, he managed to set aside his feelings about them, but when they came to the surface, Bellatrix could feel his pain intensely. How dare they.

Bellatrix’s thoughts soon turned to their growing friendship. Five weeks of extremely close proximity in the cell and no privacy whatsoever had forced them to become familiar with one another.

Harry had done his best to ignore that though. That stopped their close friendship from going further, much to Bellatrix's dismay, which grew, day by day.

She reached over and ran her fingers through his filthy and uncombed hair. It was no use worrying about it anyway. She was a horrible person who had done horrible things. How could he love her? Besides, she was old enough to be his mother! She decided not to think about it.

As she rested, a grin crept across her face. Tonight, they would be free.

Chapter #4

Bellatrix was doing her best to contain her eagerness while Harry sat in a corner. If they made the escape attempt too soon, they'd be sunk before the ship ever left port. After what seemed like an eternity, she came to the conclusion and then informed Harry that if any Aurors had been on the island, they had left for the Auror post on the mainland for the night.

Harry merely nodded and held up his hands to study the shackles that were cuffed around his wrists. He drew his power and whispered an especially strong cutting spell that would remove the magically reinforced shackles.

There was a silent thud and then a clank as they dropped off and hit the stone floor. Harry winced as he saw that the magic had hit him too and cut his wrists. They were now bleeding and Harry said a silent prayer asking for it to stop before he ran out of blood.

Holding out her shackled hands, Bellatrix walked over to Harry. "My turn." she whispered, hiding her excitement and the resulting adrenaline rush.

"Are you sure? Look what it did to my wrists."

"What's a little blood and pain compared to freedom?" Bellatrix countered with a dreamy smile.

Harry nodded, took her hands, and performed the charm. The shackles dropped off and left Bellatrix's wrists bleeding as well. "Let's get moving." Harry said, after pausing to make sure that her wounds weren't too serious.

"Reducto," Harry muttered. The cell door was no more. They quickly made their way out into the hall and towards where they estimated the entrance to be. Within a few seconds, they hit an obstacle. Apparently some of staircases that led from one leveled terrace to another disappeared when no Aurors were present.

Bellatrix made a quick study of the wall. "Use your hovering ability and get on top that." she instructed Harry. "Once you get up there, pull me up."

Harry nodded and drew again on his power. He slowly floated up and landed on the next level which he hoped was ground level. He turned around and reached down to grab Bellatrix, absently noting that his hand was covered with blood from his still bleeding wrist. She moved her hand, which was bloody as well, towards Harry and he prepared to grasp it.

The breath was knocked out of Harry the instant their hands came into contact and the blood mixed. He instinctively tried to let go, but something was holding their hands together. A warm sensation spread from his hand through his body until he felt it everywhere. A second later it became scorching hot, and then all together, it was gone, leaving no trace. Their hands separated the instant it was over.

"What was that!" Harry exclaimed. He looked down and found an astonished, but understanding, expression on her face. "Are you okay?"

She nodded weakly. "Just get me up there with you and I'll explain."

They made a second attempt and Bellatrix managed to scramble up with Harry's assistance. They sat down against a wall to rest for a quick moment. Harry wasted no time asking her about the incident. "Do you know what that was?"

"Yes." she said with a quavering voice. This was not the way she would have wanted it. He would probably be angry with her now. She should have realized what was happening. "We just performed a very barbaric, yet binding, marriage ritual."

"So those two jerks know what happened to him?" Parvati Patil said fiercely to Neville. She and her friends were sitting at one of the tables in the Common Room and Neville had taken the opportunity to approach them.

Neville quickly made a silencing gesture. “Quiet! We can’t let them hear.”

“Just tell us already!” Lavender prompted.

“I asked Snape and he said that Harry got sentenced to life in Azkaban for a crime that he didn’t do. He was framed and Dumbledore took the bait hook, line, and sinker!” Neville disclosed. “Not only that, Ron and Hermione told everyone that he had been extensively studying the Dark Arts.”

“I can’t believe it!” Parvati gasped. “How could they just do that? He’s the Boy-Who-Lived! They can’t just imprison the only person who can stand up to You-Know-Who.”

“That’s all I know.” Neville explained. “Snape says that there’s a few people who feel that Harry was definitely framed and that something needs to be done. He told me to round up students that supported Harry. I was just wondering if you’d be interested in being one of them.”

“Definitely!” Lavender said resolutely.

“Me too.”

Neville was very pleased. He had received similar responses from everyone he had approached thus far. Either Harry was popular, or he was a good judge of character. Maybe both. “We’re going to have a meeting at the Hogs Head tomorrow.”

The girls were slightly unhappy about it being on Valentines Day, but Neville promised that the meeting would be over soon enough for them to get on with their dates. They even suggested a few more people that Neville should talk to and promised to invite some others that they knew might be interested.

Grinning, Neville waved good-by and sauntered across the Common Room towards his next target while giving Ron and Hermione who

were sitting near the fire a sidelong glance. Ron had the DA, but soon, Potter's Legion would dominate it. Not to mention Potter himself.

To say that Harry was shocked would be a bit of an understatement. He had never even considered marriage or having children. Would Bellatrix want children? Did she even like him? He looked over at her and found her looking back at him with fear. It seemed that she had not deliberately preyed on him, which was good, because he didn't like to have people taking advantage of him.

Harry gathered his thoughts and did a tiny bit of Legillimency. Apparently she was surprised about the whole thing, but was not revolted either. He then tried to concentrate on that matter at hand. Escaping from the prison. "There's nothing wrong with marriage." he managed to get out. "We're friends and all that? Right?"

She nodded slowly, but looked rather unconvinced of his convictions.

"Besides, we have a prison to escape from." he said to her. He stood up and then helped her up. "Unless I'm mistaken, the entrance is in that general direction."

She nodded, "Y-yes it is."

They slowly made their way through the dark maze of corridors, trying to keep from looking at other prisoners in their cells. Harry's Scrying ability was useful in more than one instance to help avoid the few Dementors and to navigate their way towards the entrance.

Eventually, they reached a broad corridor that Harry recognized as the center hall that connected to the front doors. They quietly made their way toward the exit unhampered until they spotted five Dementors standing guard before the tall metal plated doors.

"What do we do?" Harry whispered to his new wife. No matter what he did, he couldn't get it out of his mind. Her continued silence must signify that she was thinking about it too.

"Get creative with your power." she instructed distractedly.

Harry nodded and studied the guards and the door they needed to exit from. So far, they had not noticed them in the shadows. After a minute, an idea came to Harry. “The Dementors are afraid of me, right?”

“Yes. . .” Bellatrix said, giving him a questioning look. “They avoid your presence as much as possible. Over the weeks, I’ve noticed that they’ve entirely quit patrolling the corridor our cell is situated on.”

“I think, that it would be a crushing blow to the Ministry of Magic if we were to walk out of here as if we owned the place. We have the element of surprise, they won’t want to argue with us, and the Aurors aren’t on the island during the night so there won’t be enough time to sound the alarm.” Harry said slowly.

Bellatrix thought it over and nodded her agreement. “Let’s do it then.”

Harry and Bellatrix walked out from the shadows and walked straight down the center of the corridor toward the doors and the Dementors guarding it. “Open the doors.” Harry commanded as he drew on his power to make his aura a little more menacing.

The Dementors plainly didn’t want to obey Harry. This was mostly because he was supposed to be their prisoner. It would be embarrassing to let him go, even though they weren’t particularly loyal to the Ministry. As he approached, they quailed and opened the gigantic doors and let them out into a raging rainstorm. The door closed the instant they were outside the prison.

“We weren’t counting on this!” Harry yelled to Bellatrix over the noise of the wind.

“We have no choice but to proceed.” Bellatrix yelled loudly. “There might be a boat down at the dock.”

Harry grabbed her hand and they made their way down the long path toward where boats destined for Azkaban landed. When they arrived

at the old stone dock, they found to their disappointment that there was no form of transportation.

Another jolt of magic had gone through Harry as he had stepped onto the stone and he wasn't paying attention because he was trying to figure out what was going on. He stopped wondering when he noticed that the storm had suddenly intensified. Magic was definitely at work. "We should find shelter somewhere!" Harry called out to Bellatrix.

She nodded and they turned to go back to the island but it was too late. A gigantic wave washed over the dock and the couple found themselves being plunged to the bottom of the sea. When it subsided they managed to get to the surface. They clutched each other as another wave hit them. Within a few minutes, Harry and Bellatrix who were holding onto each other for dear life, found themselves being washed out to sea.

Neville had decided to rent a private meeting room at the Hogs Head and was placing privacy charms on it as the first people to join the meeting straggled in. Neville quickly finished up and went over to welcome them.

"I hope that you don't mind that I brought a few extras." Luna said vaguely as she surveyed the small room with sharp eyes. Neville had decided long ago that her oddness did not necessarily mean that she lacked smarts.

He surveyed the 'extras' and noted that they were mostly comprised of younger Ravenclaw females. He arched his eyebrow and looked at Luna. "I see."

She motioned for them to take seats toward the front of the room and stayed behind to talk to Neville. "You are basically founding a Harry Potter fan club." she stated with a grin. "I suspect that the vast majority of recruits will be girls because of that." She pulled out a copy of the Quibbler from her robes and joined her classmates in the front.

Once everyone had gathered and Neville was ready to begin, he had to admit that Luna had been right. There were about ten boys from

various Houses sitting at the back of the room joking among themselves. However, there were nearly fifty teenage girls madly giggling and talking amongst themselves.

Neville cleared his throat. "I would like to call this meeting to order. As many of you know, Harry Potter did not return to Hogwarts after Christmas." Everyone began to murmur but a quick gesture and they all quieted down. He then began to explain everything that Snape had told him and then made the proposal to create a group called 'Potter's Legion.'

"What will we do as a group?" asked one of the more solemn boys toward the back.

"I'm glad you asked that." Neville said, trying to hide his nervousness. "If Harry ever gets out of Azkaban, he'll be angry at certain people. We want to be able to make it clear that we supported him and that we are his friends. We'll take any and all opportunities to defend his character and reputation. Last of all, we'll train as a group to become extra proficient in Defense spells and techniques. I've convinced two professors and two Aurors to help train us."

Excited whispers broke out instantly. It wasn't often that one got first-hand training and experience with an Auror. Not only that, the type of organization appealed to them all. It kind of felt nice to belong to something. This would lead to talk and bragging however.

After the talk died down again, Neville pulled out a sheet of parchment. "To join, you all need to sign this." Snape had given it to him and instructed Neville to make sure everyone who knew anything important had their signature on it. He then pulled out a bag of Sickles. "Everyone who signs gets one of these. They'll display the date and time of each meeting."

"What about Quidditch practice?" called out one of the boys.

"I'm sorry," Neville said, "but we'll have the meetings regularly despite Quidditch. Attendance is not mandatory, so you can just skip

the ones you can't attend. Be sure to talk to someone who did attend to get any important information however."

Everyone seemed to think that was fairly reasonable and after a few more matters of business were covered, namely speeches about secrecy, Neville dismissed them all to go about their business. I wonder what Harry would think, Neville mused.

Chapter #5

Bellatrix Potter, as she was now known, was woken up by a bright light. It occurred to her that she was very likely dead now and was about to meet her Maker and have the pleasure of explaining some of the things she had done in life.

Upon opening her eyes, she discovered that this was not indeed the case. The bright light was actually the noonday sun which was shining in her eyes from its position directly above her. Further examination revealed that she was lying on a extremely rocky beach. This was evidenced by several rocks poking her back.

A shadow suddenly loomed over her. "You slept for quite a while." came Harry's amused, yet relieved, voice.

"What happened?" she croaked. Her mouth was extremely dry and saliva wasn't doing much towards fixing the situation.

"I believe that we've been washed up on some sort of island." Harry stated in a matter-of-fact way. He reached out his hand to help her up and she took it gratefully. He motioned toward a large puddle a few feet away. "That's left over from the rain; you can drink it."

Bellatrix nodded gratefully and stumbled over to take a long drink from the surprisingly fresh water. Once finished, she crossed her legs and sat down facing the ocean. "I think that we may have been better off in Azkaban. I have no idea as to how we get back to England." She looked up at Harry who instead of looking worried, was grinning.

"Not to be contrary," he replied, "but I think that we'll be fine on this island."

"What gives you that idea?"

"Look behind you."

She stood up, complied, and was met with a shocking sight. Further inland loomed the largest castle that she had ever seen in her life. It

reminded her of Hogwarts excepting for two things. First, its layout was very uniform, elegant, and symmetrical. Secondly and most obvious, was the fact that it appeared to have been carved from one gigantic piece of shiny obsidian. “What is that?”

Harry shrugged. “No idea. I reckoned that we could make our way over and see if we can find anything of use in it.”

“Does anybody live there?” Bellatrix wondered out loud.

“I don’t think so.” Harry stated confidently. “I’ve attempted to do some Scrying and Legillimency, and have found nothing. It would probably be safe to say that it is abandoned. Not only that, I get the creepy feeling that we’re the only living creatures on this island as well.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good or bad thing.” Bellatrix said softly. “Lead on. There’s nothing better to do.”

The two started walking and soon found themselves at the foot of a long, single piece, obsidian bridge. Apparently the island was actually two islands. The castle was on a separate island that was connected to the island they were on with said bridge.

After crossing the bridge, Harry and Bellatrix found themselves standing before a set of large double doors. They observed what appeared to be a coat of arms set above the doorway. It bore a single star. Polaris for the House of Polairix.

Harry merely shrugged, but Bellatrix exhaled abruptly. “I can’t believe that I didn’t remember this when I told you about being the Lord of Polairix. This place was only a legend even when the last Lord of Polairix was alive.”

“What is it?” Harry asked curiously.

Bellatrix answered in an awed tone. “This is the Fortress of Nair’icaix, Seat of the House of Polairix.” At Harry’s perplexed look, she began to babble. “Some of the most powerful Dark Lords to ever live broke

themselves on the walls of this castle. Not because they hated Polairix, but because of the old saying. ‘He who holds Nair’icaix, holds the Heart of Magic.’”

“Sounds like a hefty piece of real estate.” Harry drawled lightly.

While the majority of Hogwarts students were enjoying themselves in Hogsmeade, the Order of the Phoenix was having an emergency meeting in the Headmaster’s office. Everyone was whispering nervously as they waited for the last stragglers to make their way to their seats.

Soon, everyone was present and Dumbledore stood up. “We have a situation that could be potentially serious he announced gravely.” He then gestured to Shacklebolt. “Would you brief everyone please?”

Kingsley Shacklebolt stood up as Dumbledore sat down and stepped over to where everyone present could see him clearly. “Last night, at approximately eleven o’clock, Harry Potter and Bellatrix Black escaped from Azkaban.”

Several of the Order members gasped. “How?” exclaimed Professor McGonagall. “Those two aren’t Animagi are they?”

“No, they’re not.” Hermione stated smugly. It was nice to know more than they did.

Shacklebolt gulped nervously. “That’s the disturbing part. The Aurors on site and others who investigated have concluded that the two prisoners, who were sharing a cell, may have used wandless magic. Once free from their cell, they made their way to the main doors of the prison and Mr. Potter commanded the Dementors on guard to open the doors and let them go. The Dementors were intimidated and they did so.”

“You only call this situation ‘potentially serious!’” exclaimed Mrs. Weasley. “Someone who can do wandless magic and scare Dementors is at large!” She pointed to Ron and Hermione. “There’s

no doubt in my mind that he will want revenge if he finds out about Ron and Hermione.”

“Yes, Molly. This situation is only potentially serious.” Dumbledore said very firmly. “When Harry and Bellatrix escaped, there was an extremely serious rainstorm in progress. There was no mode of transportation off the island, and a search has revealed that they are no longer on the island. It is possible that they drowned.”

Remus was about to step in and voice his opinion that there was no possible way that Harry could have drowned after facing the Dark Lord so many times and surviving, but a sharp glance from Snape silenced him. It was probably best if they believed Harry to be dead even if he was alive.

“Nevertheless,” Dumbledore continued after a momentary pause, “we will start discreetly searching for the escapees.”

“Why not notify everyone via the Daily Prophet?” Ron inquired. “If there’s a mass search, there is no way that they’ll be able to hide for very long. He’s not an Animagus and he can’t be independent for very long.”

Snape snorted. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Why is it dumb and what would you suggest?” Tonks asked, deliberately giving Snape an opening to manipulate the Order a little.

“In case you have all forgotten, Potter’s arrest was not reported in the Daily Prophet. If you suddenly state that he’s escaped from Azkaban, you will make people wonder what is really going on. It’s quite obvious that Potter will seek aid from his ‘friends.’” He sneered at Ron and Hermione. “Simply wait for him to appear.”

Moody nodded in what appeared to be reluctance. “I think that would probably work. He has an uncanny ability to sneak around this castle as his father and his friends did.”

“It’s settled then.” Dumbledore announced. “I’ll convince Minister Fudge to remain silent about the situation.” He then addressed Ron and Hermione. “Make sure that you are approachable, but not defenseless. Now, onto other business.”

As soon as the Order meeting ended, Snape nodded discreetly to Tonks, Moody, and Remus, to let them know that they should meet in their pre-arranged meeting place. An hour later, they were all having drinks at the Three Broomsticks.

“I don’t see what your strategy is.” Tonks said to Snape. Alastor and Remus nodded in concurrence.

Snape took a long swig of butterbeer before answering. “It’s probably best if they aren’t actively searching for Potter. All we have to do is warn him about Granger and Weasley’s treason. They aren’t searching for him, so we have less chance of getting caught communicating with him”

“How do we warn him then?” Lupin asked. “If you know where he might be, I’ll gladly go and talk to him.”

“No, I don’t know where he is.” Snape stated. “But I had a sudden inspiration during the Order meeting as to how we can contact him. We’ll just write out a letter to him, and then I know how I can get it to him.” He pulled out a sheet of parchment, a quill, and some ink. “We’ll make sure he knows we’re on his side and tell him what has been happening during his absence.”

That evening, during dinner, Snape crept into the dark owlery and found what he had hoped would be there. Potter’s pet owl, Hedwig. Dumbledore had mentioned to him in passing, when the students went home for Christmas, that Potter had elected to leave his owl at Hogwarts to avoid confrontations with the Dursleys.

He held out the sealed letter to her. “I need you to take this to your master. He’s in trouble and this letter contains important information.”

The owl looked at him suspiciously, but hooted and came down from her lofty perch. Snape quickly attached the letter and gave her some instructions. “Find him and deliver this as soon as you can. However, it will be no good if anyone spots you.”

She hooted and immediately flew off into the night. Snape watched until she faded in the distance and let out a sigh of relief. If Potter was alive, he would get the letter.

“Yes, it is a hefty piece of real estate.” Bellatrix replied, rolling her eyes. “If I’m correct, you’re the new owner of this fortress and that makes you richer than all of the wizards and witches in the world combined with just the value of the castle.”

Harry studied the castle. It was a pretty cool looking place, although the grounds on the outside did look a little sparse. “Let’s go in shall we?” He stepped towards the imposing door and lightly touched it. It promptly swung open without a sound.

They then stepped into the main entrance hall and looked around. There was absolutely nothing. It was simply an abandoned room. “It’s hard to believe that an army would try to conquer this place. There isn’t anything here.” Harry said.

Bellatrix was looking around thoughtfully. “I think that the castle is under some sort of spell. It’s probably designed to look like an abandoned ruin to anybody who finds it. Since you’re the heir of Polairix, you can probably undo it somehow.”

Harry was about to speak when he heard a faint whisper. “Something is whispering.” he said to Bellatrix quietly.

“It’s coming from that direction.” she said, pointing down towards the broad corridor that stretched straight in front of them from the entrance hall.

The whisper made itself heard a third time and they didn’t need any urging to try and find where it was coming from. They made their way

down the hall and soon found themselves in what appeared to be a gigantic throne room.

Massive black columns marched up to the front of the room where an imposing black throne sat upon a raised dais. The whisper grew louder as they approached it. They soon discovered that the whisper was coming from the star that was engraved in the floor in front of the dais.

When they stepped onto it, the star suddenly produced a glowing white light and a miniature column sprouted from the center of the engraved star. On the top of the little column was a mini-star which was glowing red. It stopped growing when it was as tall as Harry's waist.

"Take thy wife's hand and then place your other hand on the red star." The whisper, which was no longer intelligible, commanded.

Shrugging, Bellatrix offered Harry her hand. He gingerly held onto it as he placed his other hand squarely onto the red star. The instant he made contact with it, their world exploded into bright white light.

The whispering voice could be heard again. "All hail Harry James Potter, Lord of Polairix and Nair'icaix and Earl of the North." It paused for a moment before continuing. "Hail to the Lady Bellatrix who hath redeemed herself from her past crimes by aiding the House of Polairix. Long may she be faithful to her Lord. You shall both have strength, youthfulness, and power to restore Polairix to its glory and be triumphant over those who would oppose you."

Harry blinked as the white light faded. The first thing he noticed as he looked around was that the decor of the castle had drastically changed. The room was no longer empty. It looked as if someone actually lived there. The interesting thing was the countless banners that hung from the ceiling. On a field of emerald green flew a black shackled phoenix with a lightning bolt clutched in his talons.

He glanced toward Bellatrix to see what she thought of the new developments. Instead of observing the changes, she was on her

knees, silently crying tears of joy as she squeezed the life out of his hand. "Are you okay?" Harry asked, his voice rich with concern.

"Never better, my lord," she whispered. Her violet eyes were glowing and the tears had stopped.

Confusion clouded Harry's mind for a moment until he mentally repeated what the whispering voice had said. He quickly took action before anything got out of hand. "I'm your husband, not some overlord. I would think that would put us on an even footing." He tugged on her hand and she stood up.

"I'll accept that." she said quietly. "But I don't think I deserve you."

Harry knelt before her, still holding her hand. "Bellatrix, would you be my wife?"

She looked at him with a bemused expression on her face. "I am your wife."

"Yes," Harry replied, "you are my wife, but would you BE my wife." He glanced at her hand and noticed a silver ring with a star shaped emerald set into it on her ring finger before speaking again. "I would try to get you a ring, but it appears you already have one."

Bellatrix looked at the ring, nodded and began crying for joy again. She pulled Harry to his feet, wrapped her arms around him firmly and kissed him on the lips. She stopped for a moment and said three simple words before initiating another kiss. "I love you."

Although Harry was somewhat nervous about kissing a crying woman, especially after his experience with Cho, he was pleasantly surprised and felt a warm glow as he and Bellatrix kissed. When they ran out of air, the kiss ended and they merely leaned against each other for several minutes, and after that, they moved toward the throne and sat down together on the dais.

"So where did the ring come from?" Harry asked, breaking the romantic silence.

"I don't know." Bellatrix answered. She looked at Harry's hand and found that he too had a ring. It was obsidian and a star was outlined in the face of it with silver. "You have one too. It must have happened with the white light."

Harry studied his new ring and attempted to remove it to study it more. It wouldn't come off. "I think that it just comes with the title." he said.

Bellatrix nodded and looked at Harry studiously. "You look . . . older than you were before."

"What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "You're taller and more filled out. I think that the last thing the voice said was about strength and youthfulness. Maybe that has something to do with it."

Harry laughed. "I'm barely sixteen! The strength may apply to me, but not the youthfulness." He then looked at her closely. "You don't look a day over twenty-three."

"What!" Bellatrix exclaimed. "Where's a mirror!" Suddenly an elegant handheld mirror appeared in her hand. She looked at it with surprise before studying her face in the mirror. "Wow! There are witches who would kill to lose some years this fast!"

Harry was looking at the mirror with surprise written all over his face. "How does a mirror just appear out of nowhere? I wonder. . . is this like the Room of Requirement?" he muttered. After thinking some more, he said in a loud voice, "Any chance of getting some plates of food for two?"

Two plates filled with delicious food promptly appeared next to where Harry and Bellatrix were sitting. Without a word, they both dug in and ate until there wasn't a crumb left. "I could get used to this." Harry said with a broad smile.

Bellatrix stood up and looked around. “Everything is perfect. . . except for . . .”

“For what?”

“We’ll need the master suite of course. Any ideas?”

Harry’s obsidian ring pulsed and an image appeared in his head. “This way,” he said, pointing to a door that led to a side corridor. They started walking towards it. “What’s the master suite for?”

Bellatrix smiled and then said something that made Harry blush bright red. “It’s time for you to perform your husbandly duties. I hope that you already know about the birds and the bees.”

Chapter #6

After what could probably be described as the best night of Harry's life, he was woken up with the sunrise by a piece of folded up parchment being dropped on his face. He opened his eyes and saw that it was a letter. Sighing quietly, he unwrapped his arms from around his sleeping wife and took it up.

He didn't look at it as soon as he saw who had delivered it. Hedwig was sitting on the foot of the gigantic sleigh-bed the couple had found the night before in the master-suite. Harry grinned broadly as she quietly hooted and looked at the sleeping form of Bellatrix. "She's my wife." whispered Harry happily.

Hedwig studied Bellatrix fiercely before hooting her approval. Harry climbed out of bed, carefully so as not to awake the other occupant, and hastily slipped into some clothes found in one of the massive walk in closets the room contained.

Not recognizing the handwriting on the envelope which was addressed to 'Harry Potter,' Harry took great care in opening it. It would not do to be booby trapped. He glanced down toward the end and found the signatures of Professor Lupin, Moody, Tonks, and surprisingly, Snape. A further look at the letter revealed that they had each taken turns writing.

Dear Potter:

(Snape) The Order is aware of your escape from Azkaban, but no one knows where you are. Before you do anything, you should know that Granger and Weasley have betrayed you. They secretly joined the Order during the summer. Instead of searching, the Ministry and Order plan to wait for you to try and contact your friends for help. DO NOT CONTACT THEM!

(Lupin) Harry, I just want you to know I did not know anything about the past events until Dumbledore told us you had been arrested. We, even Snape, are on your side. So at least give us a chance before taking revenge on everyone.

(Tonks) Wotcher Harry! I hope that the Dementors didn't get you too far down. If you need help, you can contact one of us and we'll try to think something up. Until then, avoid Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwarts.

(Moody) CONSTANT VIGILANCE! Wherever you are, practice whatever Defense you can! Snape has gotten young Longbottom to organize a 'new' defense group and I'm scheduled to help teach it. As of yesterday, anyone who claims to be a member of DA IS NOT your friend. If you contact us, use code words. You can be

(Snape) Star. Your codename will be 'star.' If you don't understand, then talk to us about it.

(Lupin) I think that's about all for now. Try to keep in contact, Harry. We do really want to help.

(Tonks) Hey, do you know anything about Bellatrix Black, because she escaped the same night you did and I thought her name was Lestrange.

Best wishes-

Remus, Snape, Moody, Tonks

Harry grinned as he read the letter. It was comforting to know that he still had friends. His Legillimency was advanced enough that he could detect an aura of truthfulness radiating from the letter, so he didn't bother to Scry on the writers.

Remembering Hedwig, he turned back to her. "There's some sort of owl loft in one of the towers" The ring communicated to Harry in its own little way that this was indeed true and that there was plenty of treats for her too. "You can go there if you want." Hedwig hooted happily and flew out of the room to find it.

The ring then informed Harry that his private study was through one of the doors that led into the room and down a short hall. Harry followed the directions and found himself in a rather large room with

an ornate desk in the center. The walls were lined with built-in bookshelves groaning from the weight of many tomes.

Harry found the necessary writing supplies on and in the desk and drafted a response to the letter. He wrote it rather obliquely in case it got intercepted. It wouldn't do to have his supporters jailed for aiding him.

Dear Severus, and friends: (Now no one would even consider that Harry had written the letter)

After a rather hectic night, I found lodging that will be more than adequate for quite a while. Perhaps we can have a home-warming party at some point.

While otherwise occupied these last few weeks, I did in fact become aware that I did not have quite as many friends as I hoped, but am overjoyed to hear from all of you. I was not aware that they had been allowed to join the club though. That rather ticks me off to be honest.

I harbor no ill feelings for you and your friends, though others would be advised to stay away from me. Especially while I'm trying out new spells.

Yes, I know all about that particular woman. She happens to be my wife.

Cheers!

'Star'

Harry folded the parchment up, addressed it to 'Severus Snape' and found a bit of sealing wax to put on it. Then on impulse, he impressed his ring into the drying wax. It left a perfect imprint of the star of Polairix. He held it up and was trying to figure out where to put it until Hedwig could deliver it when a wooden box labeled "Letters to be Posted" appeared in front of him. He shrugged and dropped the letter in. The parchment disappeared with a flash of white light and the box soon followed.

When he looked up, he was surprised to find a ghost hovering in front of his desk. "Who are you?" Harry asked, the look on his face expressing his shock.

The ghostly man bowed deeply. "Until you find a suitable replacement, I will be serving as your personal secretary. Call me Reggins." He then gestured towards a spot on Harry's desk where a stack of official looking parchments appeared. "I have taken the liberty to draw up some important documents that you need to sign in order to bring the House of Polairix and the North back to its fully independent and functioning status."

"Okay then." Harry took the first parchment off the top of the stack and examined it. "What's this?"

"That is an order that expels the British Ministry of Magic from the island of Azkaban which is within your dominion. It will invalidate any authority they have and will give you control of the Dementors and prisoners currently held there. The Ministry may wish to negotiate a treaty with you which will allow them to continue sending their prisoners there." the ghost explained in a monotone.

Harry looked at the parchment carefully before coming to a decision. "Do I have the resources to adequately control the island, prisoners, and Dementors?"

"You will when you finish signing everything." the ghost explained patiently.

"What if I don't want them to know my name right now?" Harry asked worriedly.

The ghost shrugged. "'Lord Polairix' will do. You could sign the parchment 'Billy Bob' and it would still be valid if you wanted it to be. The document will automatically have your magically binding seal attached to it."

Harry grinned evilly and scrawled ‘Lord Polairix’ on the line below all the writing. He then placed the signed parchment in a new pile and took the next one. “And this one?”

“Official instructions directed to Gringotts ordering them to make your vaults available to you which include your trust vault, the Potter vaults, Potter investments, Potter properties and the massive vaults belonging to the House of Polairix. Since you are not under the authority of British law, they will not be able to inform the Ministry of any activity.”

It was promptly signed. “And this?”

“Declaration commanding all Dementors to return to Azkaban. You’ll also need to press your hand to the signature once it dries. Dementors are magical creatures with no formal government. Pressing your hand will make a special magical command so that the wishes in the document are carried out.”

Harry followed the instructions precisely. “Next?”

“That is a proclamation to all persons and creatures that reside in your dominion notifying them that you’re now actively presiding over them. Copies will be sent to them all instructing them to contact you as soon as possible.”

After that, the stack was mostly full of documents that ordered various tedious things to be carried out. Stuff like declaring the island of such and such to be his, money transfers, and other similar tasks. The ghost seemed convinced that they were all deadly important, so Harry signed them all. The last parchment was rather interesting though. “This?”

“Notification to the Hogwarts Board of Governors that they are hereby disbanded. Ravenclaw, the last of the Founders, turned Hogwarts over to the House of Polairix for safekeeping. Apparently your ancestor was the only wizard alive that she really trusted.”

This was slightly confusing. “If I own it, why is there a Board of Governors?”

“The grandson of the Polairix who acquired Hogwarts instituted the Board to keep things simple. However, there were certain conditions which had to be met by the Board. One of those conditions was that they had to keep the Ministry of Magic out of Hogwarts. They failed last year and complete control reverts to you.” The ghost explained.

“Also, it was required that only the most upstanding people were to be on the Board. Lucius Malfoy and some of his friends don’t quite meet that criteria. On a side-note, you’ll be in charge, but you aren’t allowed to make drastic changes until the current term is over.”

Harry signed that one with satisfaction. Reggins smiled, which Harry had deduced was a rare occurrence, and then floated off with all of the signed parchment following him. Harry was smiling absently as he thought about the surprise a few people would be getting as soon as the ghostly secretary sent those out.

It was then that Harry got a surprise of his own. Bellatrix strolled into the study wearing absolutely nothing. “Where did you go?”

“Just carrying out some business and writing a letter.” Harry answered vaguely as he tried to not stare at her so obviously. She seemed to bask in his gaze though. “How about having breakfast now?”

She shook her head. “Maybe later. I had some other ideas about what we could do.” she said in a rather suggestive voice. Harry didn’t need any more convincing.

“The Dark Lord still shows no intention of stepping up hostilities for the time being.” Snape reported to Dumbledore dutifully. “As for your questions about Bellatrix Black. . . apparently she did something rather displeasing. Rudolphus divorced her, the Dark Lord and then a few other high ranking Death Eaters tortured her for a while before discreetly turning her over to the Ministry.”

Snape finished this all off with a sigh and then helped himself to one of the old man's proffered Lemon Drops. He sat down in a chair off to the side as Dumbledore sat and pondered the newest results.

"Bellatrix is no longer a Death Eater then." Dumbledore muttered to himself as he thought about the simultaneous escape of Harry and Bellatrix. "Do we have a new Dark Lord in the making? Are they even alive?"

The latter question was also on Snape's mind. Potter still had not answered his letter. He certainly hoped that the boy was alive. His musings were interrupted when the door to Dumbledore's office flew open and the Minister of Magic huffed in, followed by his aide, 'Weatherby.'

"Dumbledore! What do you know about the Lord of Polairix?" Fudge was breathing heavily and looked panicked, angry, and confused all at the same time.

Both Snape and Dumbledore were shocked. What had brought the subject to Fudge that the Order had been so careful to keep secret? Dumbledore remained surprised, Snape grinned evilly as he realized what this must mean.

"What do you mean, Cornelius?" Dumbledore asked cautiously.

"These things!" the Minister replied, waving several documents around. "These were all on my desk when I arrived at my office this morning. They're all orders, declarations, and notifications from the Lord of Polairix!"

Dumbledore was shocked. He had just spent a great deal of time trying to track down the Heir of Polairix and all this time he had been biding his time wherever he lived. He prayed that the Lord of Polairix wasn't indisposed against him or the Ministry. He then promptly explained to Fudge everything he knew about Polairix, which wasn't much.

Fudge's face paled when Dumbledore finished explaining. "Do you mean to say that all this garbage is valid?" Snape noted that young Percy was horrified as well.

"If the seal of Polairix is on the document, then it is valid." Dumbledore responded.

A few obscenities flew forth from Fudge's mouth until he managed to get control of himself. Snape watched the show with great amusement. "Perhaps you should explain to us what those parchments mean, Minister." Dumbledore nodded in agreement.

This seemed to make Fudge angry again and Snape spotted a bit of foam coming from the man's mouth. He just waved the papers around and made some sort of squawking noise. Finally, Percy just took the papers and started with the first one.

"The British Ministry of Magic is hereby expelled from the Island of Azkaban . . . all Aurors are to be removed . . . prisoners and Dementors will remain . . . necessary force will be used to see that this is carried out . . . the British Ministry of Magic will pay the House of Polairix the sum of ten million Galleons for the use of the Island of Azkaban and the use of the Fortress of Azkaban. If the Ministry refuses to pay said sum, they will be charged with trespassing. For the sum of an additional fifteen million Galleons, the House of Polairix will gladly administer Azkaban Prison and any prisoners Britain may wish to imprison there for the next one hundred and fifty years."

Signed- Lord Polairix

"He can't just do that!" Fudge said weakly, once Percy had finished summarizing the document.

"I think he just did." Snape said snidely. Potter certainly deserved a round of applause for this.

"It's highway robbery!" Fudge screamed. "We could administer Azkaban for the next five hundred years with fifteen million Galleons!"

I'm inclined to find another prison and transfer the Dementors and prisoners there."

"You can't do that." Dumbledore sighed. He was deeply shocked as well. "Anything that is on the island at this point in time is the property of Lord Polairix. Prisoners and Dementors included."

"We can just tell the Dementors to come away."

"I'd like to see you try." Snape said, barely hiding his amusement. "The Dementors are magically bound to obey Lord Polairix. Even if they were inclined to be loyal to you, Polairix has a certain amount of power over them. Might I suggest that you accept the offer? If only for the fact that the Dementors will be forced to return and stay on Azkaban."

Dumbledore nodded and made his own suggestion. "Yes, you might as well pay up. You could always try to meet with him and negotiate a better price. I could help in the negotiations if you wish."

Fudge was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, but he could still see through Dumbledore's tactic. "You just want an excuse to meet with him, don't you? Well, you don't need one. Weatherby, read the last document in the pile."

"The Board of Governors for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is hereby disbanded on grounds of violation of their functioning regulations. The House of Polairix, which outrightly owns the school, castle, grounds, and Forbidden Forest, will take direct control over the school and reserves the right to make any changes necessary as soon as the current term ends. . . etc.

Signed- Lord Polairix."

For the first time that Snape could remember, Dumbledore was utterly shocked. His blue eyes widened and then he became pale. "Eh. . . can he do that?"

"Yes, he can!" Fudge yelled. "He just did, as a matter-of-fact. I looked it up in the records. Rowena Ravenclaw turned Hogwarts over to the House of Polairix shortly before her death."

"I certainly hope that Lord Polairix is amiable to you two." Snape said. He stood up. "If you'll both excuse me."

As soon as he got out in the hall he began to laugh hysterically. He quickly stifled it however, it would be embarrassing if a student spotted him. He then made his way down to his office where he found a letter on his desk. It was from Potter.

He quickly read it and smiled. Potter wasn't angry at him at least. Not only that, he had hinted that he might get an invitation to come over to wherever they were. He set it aside and began to draft out some lesson plans. I wonder what Lupin will think when he finds out that there is now a Mrs. Potter, he thought.

Lord Silvere

Chapter #7

The newlyweds dragged themselves out of bed just in time for dinner. Deciding to be formal, they went on a quest and found a small dining room. A few ‘wishes’ later and they were enjoying a large meal of various dishes. Bellatrix was vaguely reminded of past feasts at Hogwarts.

As they ate, Harry studied Bellatrix discreetly. He had a wife. That sounded strange. He finally broke the silence to voice a concern. “I don’t mean to sound ungrateful,” Harry said, “but I would like to know where all of this food and service is coming from.”

Bellatrix smiled as she sipped her punch. She set down the crystal glass. “I suspect that this castle is infested with House-Sprites.”

“House-Sprites?”

She nodded informatively. “Yes, House-Sprites. They’re little fairy-like creatures that love to nest in castles that have a magical ‘aura’ if you will. The magic in the walls of the castle makes them stronger and more comfortable. In return, they exude a sort of ‘wishing power’ that makes your minor household-like wishes come true.”

Harry frowned thoughtfully. “Why is it that I’ve never heard of them? And why doesn’t Hogwarts have House-Sprites? That’s a magical place if there ever was one.”

“House-Sprites were thought to be extinct when Hogwarts was built, so they chose to use House-Elves instead.” Bellatrix explained. “You’ve never heard of them because they’re only talked about in non-standard books.”

“What do they look like?”

“No one really knows. If they ever venture out where humans can see them, they use their power to be invisible.” Bellatrix said. They

continued to eat in silence until Bellatrix resumed speaking. “Do you have any plans for the future? You’ll need to complete your education somehow.”

Harry shrugged. “I guess I’ll look for a library in the castle and study. It would be nice if you could help me a little, although it’s kind of pointless without a wand.”

Bellatrix smiled at him with amusement. “I’m your wife, of course I’ll help you. As for a wand, I’m sure that something will be arranged.”

After some discussion about Voldemort, Dumbledore, his friends, and the world in general, Harry and Bellatrix decided to invite Snape, Lupin, Tonks, and Moody over the next evening to talk about various things and to make some decisions.

They both made their way to the private study and Harry wrote out a quick invitation to the four friends to come and visit the next evening. When Bellatrix asked Harry how they were supposed to get there, a Portkey appeared, and Harry attached it to the letter. The magical outbox appeared, and the letter was made.

The couple then elected to take a rather long bath and after that, turned in for the night.

Breakfast had been served on a table in the master suite and Harry was poking at his breakfast boredly with a fork when Reggins the ghost appeared before him. “My lord, you and your lady have a visitor.”

“Who? How did they track me down?” Harry asked, somewhat surprised that someone was there.

“I asked him to come.” Reggins explained. “You and your lady are in need of wands, so I sent a message to Nasil the Wandcrafter to visit at his earliest convenience. He has come at his earliest convenience.”

Harry jumped up and headed for his walk-in closet to find some clothes decent enough for visitors. He was intercepted by Bellatrix who had emerged from the bathroom wearing a bathrobe. "You need something imposing. Something that will help your new image." she announced as she stepped in and quickly picked out some black and silver robes for him.

"What image?"

"Just trust me. I'll be down with you in a moment." she said as she removed the bath robe and began to put on a dress.

Harry started putting his robes on. "Where is Nasil from?"

"He has resided among the Ice People for many years. They have access to the rarest materials of the highest quality." Reggins informed Harry. "He is noted to be a crafter of superb skill when it comes to custom wands. You'll find him in your public study."

"Public study?" Harry asked, confused.

"You have a public and a private study." Reggins informed Harry with his familiar monotone. "The public one is for receiving visitors. The private one is where you can keep your private documents and information without having to worry about someone seeing it."

"Okay then. I'll just head on down and greet him." Harry said as he consulted his ring as to where he could find his public study.

The ring led him to a room near the main entrance hall. He stepped into the room and looked around. While his private study was cozy, this was. . . formal. The room was rather large and had green wall hangings. In the center was a large desk with a high backed chair sitting behind it. It could have been a throne. On the wall behind where Harry would sit, one of the hangings was emblazoned with the black shacked phoenix. The man that Harry assumed to be Nasil was studying it.

Harry put on a friendly smile and spoke warmly. "Thank you for coming Mr. Nasil."

The man turned around and made a small bow. "It's an honor my lord."

"Have a seat." Harry said, waving his hand and wishing for a comfortable chair to appear before the desk. He sat in his own seat.

Nasil smiled and sat down. "You've created quite a stir up North. Some are worried about what a new overlord will bring, others are excited as to what opportunities you'll provide. Your actions from yesterday won you much approval."

"Actions?" Harry asked slowly, unsure as to what he had done that would be so important.

"Those decrees you issued, dear." reminded Bellatrix who had just entered the study Harry. He had told her all about them and the actions he hoped that they would bring the night before. She approached the desk and Harry 'wished' up a chair for her beside his own.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot." Harry said with a faint tinge of red in his cheeks. He wasn't quite used to the normal run of things quite yet.

Nasil shook his head. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about, my lord. But, back to business. Your secretary communicated that you and your lady needed new wands."

"Yes, we do." Harry stated. An idea then suddenly occurred to him. "Could you make us two wands each?"

"That will be no problem at all. I'll just need to get your measurements and then carry out some tests to see what kind of wand would be best for you. Who wants to go first?" Nasil said amiably as he pulled a miniature case from his robes and enlarged it. He then pulled out a measuring tape.

Harry smiled and looked at Bellatrix. "You might as well go first."

"Very good, my lord." Nasil said absently as he began to measure Bellatrix in various places. "Which is your wand arm, milady?"

"Left." answered Bellatrix.

Nasil finished his measurements and pulled out a piece of parchment with a lot of numbers written all over it. He studied it for a moment and then pronounced, "I do believe that twelve and a third will suit you."

"Ollivander gave me a twelve inch." Bellatrix said for reference.

"He isn't quite as precise about wand-length as I am." Nasil explained. "He's an excellent wandmaker though. It's just that I'm a wandcrafter instead." He pulled several small blocks of wood from his case and presented them to Bellatrix. "Hold these one at a time and tell me which one gives you the most enjoyable 'feeling.'" He turned his attention to Harry. "While she's doing that, I'll measure you, my lord."

After measuring Harry, referring to the parchment, measuring him again, re-referring to the parchment, and then some extra calculations, Nasil was able to come up with a wand size for Harry. "It'll be a very delicate balance based on your measurements and aura, but I believe that thirteen and a seventh will do nicely."

Bellatrix had finished sampling the wood blocks. She held one up to Nasil. "I like this one the best. It gives me a refreshed feeling."

He took it from her and examined it thoughtfully. "Cherry it shall be then." He moved the stack of blocks over for Harry to sample and then pulled out a handful of plain wands that had no particular type of wood or length. "Sample these, don't wave them or try to do magic with them, they aren't standard wands."

Meanwhile, Harry was getting frustrated. Every single sample of wood felt dead and unresponsive. Finally he gave up. "None of these suit me at all."

"Curious." Nasil whispered excitedly. He gingerly took a small pouch out of the case, opened it, and gingerly placed a small selection of different samples before Harry. "Try these." He left Harry to it and shifted his attention to Bellatrix who had found a 'test wand' she liked. "Phoenix feather! Should have guessed." he said with a smile.

Harry sorted through the special samples until he came to two separate ones he liked a lot. "These two feel great." he stated to Nasil.

Nasil picked them up. "Split personality eh? No wonder measuring you up was so hard."

"What are they?"

"Black Ash and Ivory. They're rarely used for wands, but when they are and suit the owner, they produce spectacular results." Nasil explained. "Fortunately you're purchasing two wands, so having two woods won't be a problem at all. Now try these test wands."

Harry did so and once again, he couldn't find anything that fitted him. He sighed and Bellatrix patted him on the back encouragingly as Nasil tried to ease Harry's concerns. "Don't worry, my lord. I've never found a person I couldn't make a wand for."

"Any special samples?"

"I'm afraid not. The Ice People have always had a large and very broad supply of various materials that can be used for cores though." He pulled a small glass ball out of the case. "Hold this for a moment please."

White and black smoke slowly appeared in the little ball as Harry observed it in his hands. He expected it to mix and become gray, but it never did. After several minutes, the ball filled up completely and

Nasil performed a small charm on it. “I can use this to test other samples.” he explained to Harry.

With that, the wandcrafter began to pack up and write down their results to refer to later. “When I complete your wands, I’ll bring them to you. I suspect that your wands will be particularly special, my lord.”

“What do I owe you then?” Harry asked, looking around for Reggins who would undoubtedly have some sort of money order form to sign.

Nasil waved his hand to dismiss the question with a broad grin. “Don’t worry about that. Your secretary has already more than compensated me in advance for my service. He’ll also take care of the material cost later.”

“All right then.” Bellatrix said, giving Harry a smile as she did so.

“One last thing, my lord.” Nasil said, this time a bit nervously. “Reggins mentioned that you needed to hire a considerable amount of people for your staff, both for political affairs, and managing this castle and my daughters are looking for jobs . . .”

At this point, Reggins appeared from nowhere. “That’s correct, my Lord. Here is a list of positions that need to be filled and the qualifications that applicants should meet when you hire them.” The ghost then disappeared again.

“By all means, send them over sometime tomorrow.” Harry said, glad that he didn’t have to go hunting to find people. “I’d be glad to take them on.”

“Be sure to tell others that might be interested as well.” Bellatrix interjected as she examined the extremely long list over Harry’s shoulder.

“I will then. With your permission, I’ll Apparate out of here then.” Nasil smiled, as he pulled a wand from his robes.

Harry frowned. “You don’t need my permission to do anything.”

"Not to be contrary," echoed Reggins monotone voice from wherever he spent his time, "but unless you give permission for him to Apparate in or out, he cannot do it. It's the wards."

"Oh." Harry said, greatly surprised. Did Hogwarts have something similar to that? He then remembered Nasil. "Of course you have my permission, go ahead and Apparate."

section break

"This meeting of DA is hereby called to order." Ron announced formally from the podium on the raised platform that had started appearing when he took charge. Hermione would sit on a chair off to the side. It kind of seemed pointless now, though.

The only DA member other than Ron and Hermione present rolled her eyes. "Is that really necessary?" Ginny asked. "There's no one for you to preside over!"

Hermione looked confused. "Didn't you mark the time on the Galleon?"

"Yes!" Ron said defensively as he pulled his out and showed her. "That means that everyone stands in defiance! We'll just have to give them warnings about not attending. If this keeps up, we'll have to kick them out."

"I don't think they care." Ginny stated. "Maybe they still think that Harry is the only one who can really teach them anything of importance. After all, you haven't faced Voldemort or any real Death Eaters except for last June."

"If you don't mind, I think that I'll go and do some homework." Hermione said, after deciding that they weren't going to get anyone else there that night. There was no point in wasting time.

Ron sighed. "You might as well. I'll go out to the Quidditch pitch and plan for our next game. Ravenclaw shouldn't be too much of a problem, but we should definitely be prepared.

"I'll go with you." Ginny volunteered. "I can do a few laps."

Hermione made her way to the Common Room while Ron and Ginny cleaned up from their boycotted meeting and prepared to go out to the Quidditch pitch so Ron could strategize.

Why didn't anyone show up? Hermione asked herself. Ron wasn't that annoying. He did teach them all Defense after all, Hermione rationalized. But was he the best now that Harry was gone. She wasn't sure about that. Neville had been doing rather well this year.

She soon arrived in the Gryffindor Common Room fully expecting to see the normal crowd up studying or playing games. Much to her surprise, the Common Room was nearly deserted. Only a couple of seventh-years were quietly attending to their studies. Deciding that it was a fluke, she went to her dormitory, fetched her materials, and went down to study on one of the many vacant tables.

After nearly two hours of studying, the Portrait Hole opened and a large group of chattering girls made their way in and up to their dormitories. A glance at her watch revealed to Hermione that it was kind of late. A few minutes later, the missing boys straggled in, having serious discussions in twos and threes. Last to come in was Neville, Parvati, and Lavender.

Neville waved goodnight to the two girls and made his way to his dormitory. Hermione stood up and quickly intercepted Parvati and Lavender before they could go up to theirs. "Where were you two? We had a DA meeting tonight and no one showed up."

Both Parvati and Lavender seemed to be at a loss for words. Finally Parvati spoke up. "We just decided to skive I suppose."

Hermione crossed her arms. "Everyone decided to skive on the same night?"

"Well," Lavender said, slowly as if considering her answer, "Ron isn't a very good teacher."

This made Hermione rather angry. "So you're saying that Harry, who murdered a whole neighborhood full of Muggles, is better!" Before the other two girls could react, Hermione sighed. "All right, so Harry knew a lot more about Defense, but Ron still knows his stuff. You need whatever you can possibly get."

"Harry Potter would not murder Muggles!" Parvati retorted hotly. "He's the Boy-Who-Lived! All he has ever done is sacrifice himself for everyone else. Especially you!"

"Yes, he survived Voldemort, didn't he?" Hermione hissed. She still felt hurt that he had betrayed her like that. "That means he should be feared! He could be worse than Voldemort! Don't let your belief in some Dark person prevent you from at least learning how to defend yourself!"

"A lot you know!" Lavender yelled. "We're learning plenty just fine."

Parvati and Lavender then turned from Hermione and marched off. Hermione could have sworn that she had heard them mutter 'traitor' under their breath as well. Maybe it was just her imagination.

If Hermione had been thinking straight, she would have asked herself why Parvati and Lavender didn't seem to be surprised about how Harry was accused of murdering a neighborhood full of Muggles. . . .

Chapter Eight

“I can’t believe that Harry is married.” Lupin muttered as Moody, who was the last to arrive, entered Snape’s office. “And to Bellatrix Black of all people.” He snatched the letter that Harry had written to Snape and read it for the third time. “What would James say?”

“I’m sure that he would consider it a great conquest.” Snape sneered. “If it will make you feel any better, I get the impression that Bellatrix has changed somewhat. She may prove extremely useful.” He took the letter from Lupin and returned it to his desk and retrieved the miniature hoop that served as a Portkey that had come with Harry’s second letter.

Moody examined the Portkey suspiciously. “Are you absolutely sure that this came from Potter and that it will take us to him?”

“Who else would it be from?” Snape growled.

They stood in a circle and grasped the hoop. “Any idea how to activate this thing?” Lupin asked curiously. He didn’t remember anything from the letter.

Tonks shrugged. “How about ‘Lord Polairix?’”

The Portkey instantly activated and, a short jerk later, they found themselves standing in a small semi-formal dining room in which a large meal had been served for six. They all looked around in surprise. They had assumed that Harry had found a small shack or something. This room looked like it belonged in a palace.

“Welcome to Nair’icaix.” Came Harry’s familiar voice from one of the doors that had just opened to admit he and Bellatrix. “I’m glad that you decided to come.”

They all turned and gaped at them. Instead of the dirty clothes that escapees of Azkaban would wear, they were wearing very elegant robes. Bellatrix looked particularly radiant in a dark red and gold robes, Harry was wearing black with silver lining and blue overtones.

“Aunt Bella!” Tonks exclaimed as she walked over and hugged Bellatrix. Tonks finished hugging Bellatrix and turned to Harry and hugged him too. “I suppose that you’re my uncle now.”

Harry’s face screwed up in disgust. “That means that I’m Draco Malfoy’s uncle!”

“Not my favorite nephew.” Bellatrix commented. “Too arrogant and spoiled.” She gave Snape a direct look. “Wouldn’t you agree, Severus?”

“Of course.”

Lupin and Moody were acting distinctly uncomfortable in Bellatrix’s presence, so Harry quickly told everyone about their stay in Azkaban, how Bellatrix had betrayed Voldemort, and then of course their escape and marriage. “Let’s eat dinner then, shall we?”

They all sat down and began to eat. “So what is Nair’icaix?” Tonks asked.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Snape explained carefully, “Nair’icaix is a fortress alleged to be located approximately fifty miles north of Azkaban. Many of the ancient texts indicate that it is strongest fortress in the world.”

Bellatrix nodded and continued the explanation. “The Fortress of Nair’icaix has traditionally been the home of the House of Polairix. Many Dark Lords have attempted to siege the castle. They all failed.”

Lupin’s curiosity was piqued. “What happened to those Dark Lords?”

“If my guess is correct,” Snape commented, “the spells they attempted to use against the castle resulted in their own self-destruction.” Bellatrix nodded.

“How would Hogwarts compare to this castle defense-wise?” Tonks asked.

No one quite agreed on the answer to this question so they had a friendly debate for the rest of the meal. They finally concluded that both Hogwarts and Nair'icaix had superb defenses, but those of Nair'icaix's were more advanced and stronger.

Once dinner was over, Harry and Bellatrix gave the visitors the grand tour of the castle using the information their rings were able to provide them. Some of the rooms they toured were new even to Harry and Bellatrix. They ended in Harry's private study.

"Have a seat." Harry said as he sat down and unconsciously conjured several chairs for them around his desk. "We need to talk about our goals and overall strategy now that I'm out of Azkaban. As much as I'm unhappy at the Order, Voldemort must come down."

"You automatically hold the upper-hand while your identity remains secret." Snape told Harry, using his knowledge from involvement in both the Order and Voldemort's ranks. The Dark Lord, Dumbledore, and Fudge, will not risk alienating you until they know more about you.

Lupin nodded in agreement. "Gather your resources and make your plans in secret. Don't come out in the open until you are sure that you're bigger than them."

"Meanwhile," Moody suggested, "I would train your magical skills as much as you can. That library you showed us should have more than a few good books with powerful spells." His voice was then slightly grudging as he nodded to Bellatrix, "She can provide invaluable instruction."

"What about wands?" Tonks asked sensibly. "As far as I know, your wands have been destroyed and then burned. Ollivander won't likely make you a new one due to Ministry restrictions."

"I've already taken care of that." Harry said confidently. "As we speak, a wandcrafter from the North is constructing wands for us."

Lupin's eyes widened. "You found a wandcrafter! Very few reach that level in the wand-making profession. Anybody can make a good wand, but few can customize them for a specific person."

After more discussion, they all decided that they would try to hold regular meetings and on their own, would round up those sympathetic to Harry's cause. Snape also promised that he would tell Neville everything pertinent and that Neville would be allowed to tell the members of Potter's Legion a few things as well. They then adjourned.

The next morning, following breakfast, Harry made his way down to his public study. Bellatrix had agreed to take on the task of hiring those who were interested in applying for the household positions; Harry would interview those for his staff.

He had just sat down in the imposing high-backed chair and created chairs for applicants to sit in when Reggins made an appearance. "Are you ready to began interviewing?" he asked Harry.

Harry held up the portion of the list that detailed staff positions to be filled. "I do believe so. How many applicants are there?"

"As of now," said the ghost thoughtfully, "three hundred and fifty-six."

"You're joking!" Harry exclaimed. "There are only a few positions that I need filled!" He waved the list at Reggins to demonstrate his point.

"Nevertheless, my lord, you owe them the courtesy of considering each one of them." The ghost stated. "You will also need to hire more people for more positions fairly soon. Azkaban will require human wardens once the British Ministry gives it up. Keep notes on everyone that comes."

Harry sighed. "Send them in. Start out with Nasil's daughters. After all, he asked first and they're probably the ones who spread the word."

“Very good, sir.” Reggins said.

A few moments later, the door opened to admit two attractive women that Harry guessed were just barely eighteen. Their facial features were complemented with stunning silver hair and gray-blue eyes. They confidently made their way to his desk where he motioned for them to sit.

One of them spoke to Harry. “My lord, may I introduce my sister Bess. I am Tess.”

“Twins?” Harry asked.

“Yes.” said Bess neutrally. “Our father informed us that you were in need of positions to be filled. Although we might more traditionally fit in with your household staff, we are of the opinion that we could be useful for your personal staff.”

“Assuming that the job comes with a fair salary, hours, and benefits, of course.” Tess interjected. Bess nodded in agreement.

Harry made eye contact with each of them for a moment and performed a wandless Legillimency spell. He smiled as he studied their minds, which although well trained against intrusion, wasn’t quite up to his level. Their act of indifference was just that, an act. They desperately wanted jobs under the Lord of Polairix and would even work for nothing just to get them. Apparently his name looked good on resumes up North.

“Do you have any particular skills?” he finally asked them. He felt their growing nervousness fade away when he broke the silence.

Both of them nodded in the affirmative. “We both served as professor assistants at Corsai for two years.” Bess supplied quickly. “We would perform exercises such as grading papers, helping with Department business, and other various tasks.

“I’m afraid that I’m not familiar with Corsai.” Harry replied.

"It's a University of Magic." explained Tess. "We have the same standard seven year system that most countries utilize in our magic schools. However, the students who test high on their OWLs are presented with the opportunity to attend Corsai for more advanced classes."

Hermione would have loved it, Harry decided sadly. It was a shame she had chosen to stand against him. After all, she had done very well on the OWL tests. He shook off his morose thoughts and examined the list for anything that would fit Tess and Bess's skills.

After a moment of searching, 'Personal Assistants,' popped up. The description sounded perfect for them, and he could really use them to help with the job interviews. As an added bonus, he needed two. "How would being my Personal Assistants suit you?" Harry asked them.

They both nodded excitedly and beamed at him. "That would be perfect, my lord!" Tess said on the behalf of both her and her sister. "When would you like us to start?"

"Now, if at all possible." Harry said. "I'll arrange with Reggins for your salary and other important concerns.

The twin women looked at each other happily. "We're prepared to start, my Lord." Bess said. "What do you need us to do?"

Harry grabbed a sheet of parchment from a pile that appeared, a quill, and then quickly wrote out an application form that would help him sort through the applicants. "Make a lot of copies of this and then distribute it to everyone looking for a job. Have them fill it out and submit it to you." He held up his list of positions to be filled after crossing their new positions off. "Make a copy of this and post it. For each position they apply for, they have to fill out an application. Sort out the ones you collect."

Bess and Tess began their first project immediately while Harry watched until they left to distribute the applications. Things would be a lot more easier, Harry concluded.

Section break

"I must warn you, Cornelius. The action that you are about to take is extremely rash." Dumbledore said coldly to the Minister of Magic. "The Lord of Polairix is not someone to be trifled with, no matter who he is. Not only that, we cannot afford to alienate him!"

"Come now," Fudge replied angrily, "I am the Minister of Magic and I won't have some wizard who calls himself a 'lord' bossing me around. We haven't heard anything from him since his first communication. I'm willing to bet that it was a practical joke. The Aurors will remain on Azkaban."

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "Do what you will. I just hope that you're brave enough to face the consequences."

"Of course I'll face the consequences." Fudged chuckled. "I'll be viewed as a strong figure who won't be cowed by a fake overlord." He pulled a sealed parchment from his cloak and handed it to Percy who had been standing with him. "Deliver this to the Lord of Polairix."

Section break

A week later, Harry still had not quite managed to fit in with his new schedule, but he was getting close to it. At Bellatrix's suggestion, he had allotted certain times of the day toward certain things. In the morning he carried out any important business that his new staff saw fit to bring to his attention. At this point, it was mostly balancing the budget. They assured him that there would be much more to do when things got going.

During this time, Bellatrix would do whatever she felt like. Usually she settled down in the library or worked with the new servants.

The afternoon and usually most of the evening was dedicated to learning magic, magical theory, and anything else that applied. The books in his library contained a plethora of spells and curses. Once

he had his new wands, he would have more than a few tricks up his sleeve. Bellatrix had been most helpful in that regard.

Snape and Lupin had visited a couple of times to update Harry on the Order's actions as well as basic news from Britain. Nothing major had really happened. Snape reported that Neville's defense group was growing larger every day, this pleased Harry.

He was just wondering what to do next when Tess entered his private study with her father in tow. Harry stood up and greeted him warmly. "Am I correct to assume that the wands are ready?"

"Yes, my lord." Nasil said, barely succeeding in hiding his excitement. "They are completed and I am most eager to see how they work for you and your lady."

"Could you send someone for my wife? I think that she's brewing some potions in the dungeon." Harry said to Tess.

"I've already sent for her." Tess said, grinning broadly. She and her sister had been on top of things from the very start. They took great joy in being one step ahead of Harry.

Just then, Bellatrix entered the room and joined Harry. "That will be all." she said, nodding to Tess. Harry's assistant bowed and left, leaving Harry, Bellatrix, and the wandcrafter alone in the room.

Nasil promptly pulled out two elegantly carved wooden boxes. The first was made from a finely varnished cherry, the other from ebony. "You first, my lady." he intoned. He set the ebony down on the desk and handed the cherry to Bellatrix.

She opened the wooden box and gasped. Inside sat the two most beautiful wands she had ever seen. The cherry wood the wands were made from gleamed from extreme polishing and had been carved with elegant designs. "These are beautiful, Nasil!"

He nodded eagerly, "Twelve and a third inches, cherry and phoenix feather, rather delicate- but certainly powerful. They are also distinct because they are sister wands. Give them a try."

Bellatrix gingerly picked one of them up and waved it. Gold sparks shot out of it. She set it down and tried the other one, same result. "Thank you!"

"It was my pleasure." Nasil said. He motioned for Harry to take the ebony box. "Your wands are in there, my lord."

"Did you find anything that would match me for the cores?" Harry asked as he opened the wand case. Inside lay a wand made from pure black wood, the black ash he assumed. The other wand was white. It was the ivory one.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I did." Nasil said excitedly. "Just to humor me, try the black one first. Save the best for last."

Harry picked up the wand made from black ash. "What's it made of?"

"The core is basilisk venom."

Bellatrix gasped and looked at the wand and then to Nasil suspiciously. "Isn't that dangerous?"

Nasil shrugged. "It was one of the closest matches. Don't worry though. I realized that the venom is of course extremely unstable, so I embedded silver into the wood to stabilize it. Give it a wave."

"Okay then." Harry said. Black, silver, and green sparks came from the tip of the wand as if shot from a cannon. Harry closed his eyes as he felt a sense of euphoria shoot through his veins. He was powerful. After a minute of basking in the feeling, he opened his eyes and set it down in the box. "I love it."

"I'm glad." Nasil said. "I must warn you though. Don't become addicted to it and its power. It will destroy you. The combination of silver, venom, and black ash make for a very brittle wand. You could

say that the wand represents half of your personality. Use it the power that comes with it for good and you'll be fine."

Harry looked at the wand apprehensively and familiar feelings from his second-year at Hogwarts surfaced. Was he evil? "I'll try to remember that."

"Now for the last wand, my lord. I do think that this one is the best wand I have ever made, if I do say so myself."

"What is it made of?"

Nasil shook his head. "I would rather that you try it first. I was able to find the core for your other wand quite easily, but this wand was different. The core came to me. It was a miracle. I'll tell you after though."

"As you wish." Harry said as he picked up the white wand. No sense of euphoria rushed into his body, but a slightly recognizable, yet unfamiliar feeling crept in. Harry couldn't quite identify it, but it made him feel . . . indestructible. Just to be sure that it was a wand with some power, he cast the simplest charm he could think of. "Lumos."

White light exploded from the end of the wand and blinded everyone. The sun was nothing to Harry's new wand. "Nox." he whispered in an awed voice as he set it down in the case next to the black one.

"Will you tell me what's in it now?" Harry whispered to Nasil as Bellatrix continued to stare at the wand and then to Harry in turn.

Nasil was grinning uncontrollably. "Ivory, thirteen and a seventh inch, and a core of Phoenix Fire sealed in with gold and platinum. The wand is indestructible. You'll have to practice with that one to develop its full potential though."

"Phoenix Fire?" Bellatrix repeated. "I'm not familiar with it."

"No one is." Nasil explained. "It's a new substance that I've discovered. That's the miracle. Just when I began to work on the

ivory for my lord's wand, seven phoenixes appeared in my workshop. It was as if they knew who the wand was for. They provided me with phoenix tears. After that, they somehow . . . demonstrated a magical process that lit the tears on fire. Thus, Phoenix Fire."

"Wow." Harry said as everyone fell silent.

The door then opened to admit a wide-eyed Bess. "My lord! The Ice Queen is here and seeks audience with you!"

Chapter Nine

“Where is she?” Bellatrix demanded immediately.

“Awaiting Lord Polairix’s pleasure in the entrance hall.” Bess replied weakly.

Bellatrix then turned to Harry. “I’ve done some research and the Ice Queen currently controls the biggest part of your domain. There are a few islands, estates, and cities, but the Ice People are the bulk of it. You must make a good impression on her.”

“I don’t have any formal training!” Harry retorted.

“That doesn’t matter.” Bellatrix coached. “If she sees you come down from a throne, no matter what else you do, she will always remember that. You are her overlord and things could go sour if she doesn’t put her loyalties with you.”

“So I need to receive her in that one room with the throne and banners?”

“Yes! We mustn’t keep her waiting either.”

Harry then stood up and made his way out the door with Bellatrix and Bess following closely. “All right then. We’ll receive her there to make a good impression. I’ll decide what to do based on what happens. What is her name?”

“Xerina IV.” Bess replied as she motioned to some of the other members of Harry’s staff to join them. Bellatrix was seeing to their attendants.

The assembled group entered the large room and took various places as assigned by Bellatrix and Bess. Harry made his way to the imposing black throne that sat on the dais. Closer examination revealed that phoenixes were carved into the black stone. He ‘imagined’ a similar throne next to it for Bellatrix, but at her insistence,

made it slightly smaller and less imposing. ("You're the Lord of Polairix and Earl of the North, not me.") Bess stood on his other side.

"I guess I'm ready then." Harry said.

Bess nodded to the attendant at the main door to the room who opened it to admit the Ice Queen and her entourage. Harry watched as Xerina IV majestically strode toward him. She appeared to be in her late thirties, and instead of the silver hair that Bess, Tess, and many of their fellow employees had, her hair was a stunning white. A crown of clear crystal was enmeshed in it. The most striking feature was the way in which she carried herself. Even if she had not been wearing the white and silver jeweled robes she now wore, there would be no doubt that this was a woman of power and great authority.

When she arrived before the dais, she stopped instead of stepping onto it and studied Harry, her eyes flicking from Harry's signet ring before settling on his emerald green orbs. Harry then returned the stare and careful study. This lasted for a long moment as they each sized each other up.

Finally, the queen fell to her knees before the dais with her head bowed in total submission to Harry, no longer even daring to look at him directly. "Hail to the House of Polairix and the Earl of the North." she spoke. "The House of Corsairix reaffirms its fealty to thee and swears to serve and obey in all things."

There was a long pause during which Harry heard Bellatrix slowly let out a sigh of relief. Apparently an important obstacle had been overcome. Finally realizing that Queen Xerina would not rise or look at him unless he did something, Harry stood up and walked toward her knelt form. He then chose his words carefully. "Rise faithful steward." he commanded.

Harry then stretched forth his hand to help her up. Instead, she kissed his ring and then stood up on her own. However, she still had her head bowed. Feeling rather bold, Harry took her chin in his hand and gently tilted her head up until they were looking each other in the eye again.

After a little Legillimency, Harry was able to discern that Xerina was a very proud woman and had humbled herself before him because she truly felt that Harry was her overlord and had faith in his power and skill. She also seemed to be under the impression that she had just put herself in complete servitude to him.

“You need only defer to me.” Harry whispered to her, still holding her head up. “There’s no need subjugate yourself to me.” He let go and her head remained eye level with him.

“As you wish, my lord.” she whispered in return. Then she spoke in a louder voice. “I ask your leave to return to my stewardship to prepare for a visit from you in the near future. The Ice People wish to see you.”

Harry nodded. “As you wish.” Queen Xerina IV bowed and left the room slowly with her entourage.

“That went well.” Bellatrix commented happily.

Bess seemed to be in shock as she waved her hand to dismiss all of the attendants that had escorted them. “Do you know what this means, my lord?”

“No. Not really.” Harry replied as they left the room and made their way back to Harry’s private study.

“The Ice People are not normal humans.” Bess explained. “They’re people who possess a powerful brand of magic. You’ve just been confirmed as their overlord. With a flick of your hand, you could summon the most powerful army on the face of this planet.”

They returned to the private study where Nasil was still waiting. “Is everything to your satisfaction, my lord?” he asked, gesturing toward the wand cases still sitting on your desk.

“Yes, of course. They’re wonderful!” Harry said. “I’m sorry that I left like that.”

Nasil bowed with a smile. "That's perfectly fine. I'm very pleased that you like your wands. Your secretary was most generous in paying me. I thank you. If you'll excuse me." He then Apparated.

Harry sat down at the desk and found a letter from the Ministry of Magic sitting on it. "This must have just arrived." he commented to Bellatrix and Bess. He opened it and read it.

To the so-called 'Lord Polairix:' Greetings.

After a week of consideration, I've decided that the Ministry of Magic will not comply to your demands expressed last week. We don't recognize your power or authority to issue such commands and proclamations. Especially the one concerning Azkaban. The prison will remain under our control.

Cornelius Fudge

Minister of Magic

"Interesting." Harry said dryly. He then passed it to Bellatrix who read it.

She quickly skimmed the letter and looked up at him. "I think that it is high time Fudge learned who has the power in this world." she commented. "I believe that I know precisely what to do about this. Allow me a few days to engineer and carry out a plan of action. When I'm finished, you'll be able to pulverize him."

"If you want to do that." Harry said, giving her permission to do what she wanted.

"Send a short reply, make it sound ominous." Bellatrix advised as she left the room, letter in hand.

"I'd hate to have your wife mad at me." Bess snickered, before leaving to return to her normal duties.

Harry wrote out a quick note to Fudge with a grim smile. He knew that he could trust Bellatrix to come up with something effective and satisfying.

Fudge-

I feel sorry for you.

-Lord Polairix

section break

That night, Neville and the rest of Potter's Legion were in the dungeons holding one of their meetings. The Room of Requirement had been out of question due to the fact that too many others knew of it. Snape had kindly pointed the way to a large classroom that was rarely used.

"That's enough training for tonight!" called Neville from the head of the classroom as he observed one group produce corporeal Patroni and another group of younger students disarm each other. Other groups were performing a wide variety of spells. "If you got anything out, put it away and I'll tell you some important news."

Parvati and Lavender quickly flanked him as they waited for everyone to clean up. The two girls had basically appointed themselves his assistants as they met more and more often. Neville didn't really mind because they were masters at getting new members and keeping the current members together. They were pretty good at Defense too.

As soon as the room was once again clean and everyone had turned their attention to Neville, he spoke. "What I'm about to tell you is top secret. Harry has escaped from Azkaban."

Excited whispers broke out among all the students present. Neville calmly waited for them to quiet down before continuing. "It has also been discovered that Harry's mum wasn't quite as much of a Muggle-born as was thought. Based on her lineage, Harry has been made the Lord of Polairix."

“What’s that?” called out several students.

“It means that he controls the Lands of the North.” Neville explained briefly. “He has a lot of power and the Ministry can’t even touch him now. According to Professor Snape, who is in contact with him, Harry is slowly planning how to take Voldemort and the Ministry on. Our job right now is first- to continue our training, and second- to spread the word that Harry is ‘good.’ No one knows that he was sent to Azkaban excepting a few people. Any questions?”

“How do we spread the word that he is good?” called out a second-year girl excitedly.

Parvati stepped forward for this answer. “Don’t let people get away with speaking ill of him. Correct them and defend him without revealing information about him. You can also talk about Harry to others in reference to Voldemort. Always show him in the good light.” Lavender nodded in agreement.

Neville looked at his watch and sighed. “It looks like we’ve run out of time. Next time we’ll discuss Ministry politics and what we know about Death Eaters. It helps if you can understand those you’re fighting against.”

Everyone nodded and began to filter out of the room in twos and threes. Neville watched them go happily. He would have told them more about Harry, Bellatrix and Nair’icaix for example, but for now, it was best if they couldn’t betray the important things. Besides, Harry deserved to be the one to tell. Neville also was slightly confused about the Bellatrix connection. She was partially responsible for his parents condition. However, he would reserve judgement until he met her. Maybe she had changed.

“I think that went well.” Parvati said to him as Lavender left with the last students.

“I hope so.” Neville said. “After this latest news, I’ve realized that Harry doesn’t necessarily need us. We and the Wizarding World need

him more. Instead of Potter's Legion, we should be Ambassadors to Potter."

Parvati nodded. "Yes, there's no doubt that Harry will be angry toward those who betrayed him. I certainly would be. Maybe we'll be able to keep him from holding a grudge against everyone in general."

Neville nodded and was about to leave when Parvati spoke up again, rather quickly and seemingly out of breath. "Uh, Neville?"

He turned around and looked at her. "Yes?"

"I was wondering, if well, you would go to Hogsmeade with me on the next weekend we're there." Parvati blushed and kept talking before he could answer. "We could just get some drinks at the Three Broomsticks."

"Sure." Neville said cheerfully.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Parvati was blushing madly, but still seemed happy. "Well, see you then." She then darted off.

Neville smiled as he made his way to exit the classroom and go back to Gryffindor Tower. Apparently Potter's Legion had benefitted him as well. Although it was somewhat a Harry Potter fan club, some of the girls thought that Neville was a good catch too.

Section break

"Wormtail!" Voldemort barked from his sickbed. "Get in here now!"

The door opened and Peter Pettigrew came in very slowly, closing the door behind him. He was shaking. "Yes, my lord?" Voldemort was in a sickbed, but he still could shoot off the Cruciatus Curse with deadly efficiency.

“It’s time that the Muggle-loving fool learns a lesson. Hogsmeade weekend is coming in two weeks or so. Tell Malfoy to get the Dementors located and moved for an attack. There’s a nice hiding spot that I know of near Hogsmeade.” Voldemort said.

“That can’t be done, my lord.” Wormtail whimpered, closing his eyes in anticipation of the word ‘Crucio.’

“Why not?” Voldemort whispered, staring intensely at his servant.

Wormtail gulped. “The Dementors are gone. They left.”

“And why was that?”

“The Lord of Polairix summoned them to return to Azkaban. Our spy in the Ministry also indicates that Polairix expelled the Ministry from the prison. The Ministry has taken the return of the Dementors as a sign that they are the ones truly in control. They’ve decided to stay on Azkaban.” Wormtail explained, hoping that he wouldn’t be blamed.

Instead of torturing Wormtail, Voldemort considered the news and what he knew about the House of Polairix carefully. “Fudge is a fool if he thinks he can defy the Lord Polairix. Even if Polairix was a squib! My books have revealed that much.” he finally pronounced. “We must get those Dementors back before their overlord is able to establish absolute control. Scratch the Hogsmeade plan.”

“What do we do then?” Pettigrew asked.

Voldemort grinned evilly and sat up. “We’ll send a group of ‘junior’ Death Eaters to Hogsmeade to act as a distraction while we siege Azkaban.”

“Didn’t you just say that Lord Polairix was powerful?” Wormtail asked, confusion etched in his voice.

“Silence!” Voldemort commanded, rising from his sickbed. “Fudge may be a fool, but he has bought us time. Azkaban can and will fall if

it is still under the control of the Ministry. If we can get a hold on Azkaban, we might be able to get a grip against Lord Polairix. A bargaining chip if you will."

Chapter Ten

"I've left out some texts that you should probably study a little bit this afternoon." Bellatrix told Harry as she wrapped a dark red cloak around her and then pulled the hood over her head. She then used a charm to shadow her face so that only her mouth and part of her nose could be seen. "Other than that, just do some drills."

"Are you sure that you don't want me to know what you're planning?" Harry asked. Nearly a week had passed since Fudge's letter had been received. Bellatrix had been planning something since then. She had done endless research in the library and archives.

Bellatrix smiled at him. "It's a surprise. Fudge will learn his lesson; he might even prove useful to us in the future."

"Be safe then." Harry said, deciding not to press the issue any further.

"I will. I might be back late though." Bellatrix said. She gave Harry a quick peck on the lips and then pulled out her wand to Apparate. "Have a good day, dear." She then disappeared with a quiet pop.

Harry smiled and made his way up to the private study to go over his daily stack of business. The load had increased after the audience with Queen Xerina. She had been sending him endless reports on everything that concerned him.

Apparently he owned thirty percent of the profits from the gold, platinum, sapphire, silver, and ruby mines located in the North. Thirty percent from over a thousand years stacked seemed that North Gringotts, which was entirely independent of the other Gringott branches of the world held the vast bulk of his he had in Britain was negligible.

She had also scheduled a national day of feasting in his honor in three days. He and Bellatrix were required to attend the first day at least. It would be interesting.

He entered his office and found Reggins waiting with the newest set of documents. The Ministry's refusal to vacate Azkaban had created problems which required ten times more paperwork to get around. Reggins assured Harry that everything would be fine though.

The ghost still served as the personal secretary, even though Harry had hired a large staff of workers. Harry was supposed to be looking for a suitable replacement, but he wasn't looking very hard.

After lunch, Harry made his way to the library which served as his all-purpose classroom. He found the books that Bellatrix had left out and quickly skimmed them. The material didn't seem very hard at all, which was odd. It was more advanced than NEWT levels.

Harry finished and began his drills, absently wondering what Bellatrix was up to.

Section break

Bellatrix appeared with a small pop just down the street from Gringotts in Diagon Alley. She quickly put her wand in its holder that was on the inside of her cloak. Its twin was in a sheath on her wrist.

She quickly blended in with the crowd and made her way to the bank. Upon entering, she went to the nearest goblin she could find. Mustering all the kindness she could, she spoke. "Would you be kind enough to show me to the Chief Financial Advisor's office?"

"Yes, ma'am." the goblin answered, immediately leading the way down a broad hall and into an office.

The goblin in the office stood and bowed. "My name is Holdhook. How may I be of service?"

"I need to make some purchases and acquire holdings in some rather large companies. Your advice would be of the utmost usefulness to me." Bellatrix answered, sitting down at a chair in front of the desk.

“Do you have an account with us?”

“Polairix.” Bellatrix said simply.

The goblins eyes widened and he looked at Bellatrix’s ring closely because her face wasn’t available for scrutiny. “I see, my lady.” He snapped at the goblin who had led her in. “Get me the Polairix file immediately.”

The goblin returned only a second later, clearly out of breath. He handed the thick file to Holdhook and left the room, closing the door behind him. Holdhook then opened the file and drew out several papers.

“Vault numbers one through seven. The first initial transfer to Gringotts came from North Gringotts. The current balance, including the Potter and Black estates, comes to. . . eight hundred and ninety six billion galleons in cash. Approximately two hundred million in real estate. I imagine that the bulk of your fortune is managed by North Gringotts however.” Holdhook summarized for Bellatrix’s benefit. “You and your husband, are without a doubt, our biggest customers.”

“Is there any interest associated with all that?” Bellatrix asked faintly. She had not known that Harry was that rich. Well. . . it was her money through marriage as well, but she couldn’t help but feel that it was Harry’s more than hers.

“Of course.” Holdhook replied. “What did you want to do today?”

“I wish to obtain managing control of the Daily Prophet and, if possible, full ownership.” she announced. “For this piece of my business, cost is of no concern.”

Holdhook steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “I believe that the Daily Prophet is owned by about five or six shareholders. If you can buy out at least four of them, you probably won’t have any trouble at all when it comes to managing control. Buying them out will probably require you offering triple the value of their shares, but it can be done.”

“Offer whatever you must to get them all.” Bellatrix decided. “Try to keep the business strictly secret though.”

“I can get you control of the paper by next week I think.” Holdhook declared, making some notes on a piece of parchment. “What else did you wish to do?”

Bellatrix thought over her next move again. This could go well, or it could go bad. “I would like to invest in Gringotts.” she said slowly. “The House of Polairix would be honored if the goblins were to be our allies.”

Holdhook was even more surprised than before. “Your account with us is more than a significant investment, which is nothing strange, but allies?”

“Yes, we would like you to be our allies. Hard times are coming. The Ministry is incompetent and Voldemort is on the rise. The House of Polairix intends to play a significant part in Britain’s future.” Bellatrix declared.

“I have no authority to do something like that.” Holdhook admitted. “Would it be suitable if the Head of Gringotts called on you and Lord Polairix tomorrow?”

Bellatrix nodded happily. “That would be wonderful. I’m sure that Lord Polairix could come to you here at Gringotts, however.”

“We would be honored.” Holdhook said. “Extremely honored. What time should we expect Lord Polairix?”

“Ten, I think.” Bellatrix answered thoughtfully. Harry could probably get most of his work done early and then be back from Gringotts in time for his afternoon training.

Holdhook nodded excitedly and made a note. “We’ll be expecting you then. Any other business?”

“Yes, lots more.” Bellatrix said. “I would like to obtain managing control of St. Mungos, but not ownership.” That hospital needed big improvements and expansions for the coming war. It would help if she could make sure they happened.

The goblin made the appropriate notations and they continued with Bellatrix’s requests. Several hours later, the House of Polairix was slated up for some major investments in nearly every industry and company in the wizarding world. If they went through, Harry would be able to virtually control the economy by next week.

As Bellatrix left Gringotts, she changed her cloak to a light blue color and did some self-transfiguration. It was time for phase two of her plan.

Section break

Harry yawned as he turned the page of one of the older books in his library. He had finished his studies, drills, and dinner. Still no Bellatrix. Hopefully she wasn’t in trouble. She had told him that she would be late though. The chapter on the page suddenly grabbed his attention.

Splitting Spells

A powerful wizard or witch may be able to cast a spell and ‘split’ it so that there are actually two beams of light going for the target. This can be used both for a double hit, or to counter any dodging move the opponent may make. Further study, practice, and magical ability can allow the witch or wizard to be able to control the movement of the spell even after it leaves his/her wand. A word of caution, this spell is not for the weak. Spells won’t be as strong separate as they would have been had they remained together.

“This would be very effective against a large crowd of Death Eaters, or of course, someone who dodges.” Harry observed to himself. He looked at the incantation and pulled out his Black Ash wand. “*Duplexio Stupefy.*” he muttered. A pair of stunners shot from his wand and harmlessly hit a wall.

Harry practiced the spell several times and eventually was able to force the stunners to move toward any target he chose. He couldn't make them go anywhere he pleased, but he could subtly manipulate them to curve one way or another until they hit something.

After that he tried the Duplexio spell combines with several other jinxes and curses he knew. They all worked excellently. He was just about to give up for the day when he had a couple of ideas. Perhaps the spell could be manipulated.

"Triplexio Stupefy!" he uttered. Much to Harry's delight, three stunners shot from his wand. His ability to control them decreased with the addition of the third stunner, but a little practice would solve that problem.

He then pulled out his other wand and put it in his left hand. "Triplexio Stupefy!" he whispered, concentrating on both wands. The nearest wall was attacked by six separate stunners. Harry grinned at his wands and began another experiment. "Tetraplexio Stupefy!"

Section break

"Are you finding everything that you need, dear?" asked the stout woman who was in charge of the Ministry Archives. "The Ministry doesn't really store documents from very many Goblin Rebellions, but I do believe that you might find some pertinent entries in the International Relations section over there."

Bellatrix Potter, who now appeared to be a blonde and blue-eyed girl of 18, smiled sweetly at the helpful archivist. "I've found a few things that ought to be helpful for my report, but I need so much more, Mrs. Drake. What shall I look under?"

"The Ministry often is required to report their current state-of-affairs to the International Confederation of Wizards." Drake told Bellatrix. "They would have mentioned a few things about any ongoing Goblin Rebellions."

“Thank you so much.” Bellatrix said. She stood up from the pile strewn with various folders filled with parchment and made her way over to the said section of the Archives while Drake returned to whatever she did at her desk.

Making sure that Drake was occupied, Bellatrix dropped her act of searching through the International Relations section and studied the door to the secured vault that contained just about anything that the current and past Ministers of Magic wanted to keep secret. She could definitely take it on. But only if that woman would go away.

She returned to her table with a random file she had grabbed from the section and made a good show of being absorbed with the contents. Too bad the contents were so horribly boring and petty! Cauldron bottoms indeed.

After another two hours of extreme patience on Bellatrix’s part, her chance finally came when Drake stood up from her desk and approached her. “Finding everything you need?” she asked.

A fake smile. “Yes! There’s so much in the International Relations section. I’ll have everything I need in no time.”

Mrs. Drake nodded importantly. “Yes, I thought that there would be plenty there. I need to attend a short staff meeting upstairs, dearie. Do you think that you’ll be all right down here alone?”

This time the smile was a little more genuine. “Absolutely. There’s so much here that I’m sure I won’t need too much assistance from you for a while.”

Mrs. Drake nodded. “I won’t be gone for very long.” She turned around and left the large archive room with Bellatrix alone in it. Based on experience so far, she would be gone for a long time. The old lady probably was a true gossip.

Bellatrix quickly abandoned her supposed project and quickly strode to the vault while simultaneous pulling out her sister-wands. “Totalium silencium protegix.” She muttered, giving the wand in her left hand a flick and then holding onto the ward she had just cast. Since it was

still in contact with her wand, she would be able to quickly detect any intrusions through the ward's border.

With her other wand, she carefully performed several unlocking and shield destroyer curses. After several minutes, the vault opened with a resistant screech. Bellatrix winced even though she had placed silencing charms around the room.

As soon as the vault was completely open, she stepped inside and began to rummage through the collections of documents and inter-office memos- especially the ones pertaining to Cornelius Fudge. After a few duplication charms on various parchments, disguising spells on the resulting copies, and a spell to erase any trace of her presence, Bellatrix exited and closed the vault.

Now she would have the pleasure of cleaning up her papers from the Goblin Rebellion search. If she left it all out, the archivist would be more apt to remember her and exactly when she was around. Not that it mattered or anything, what with her disguise. But sloppy work could lead to more sloppy work.

Section break

Narcissa Malfoy gave her husband an intense look and began tapping her foot the moment he entered the bedroom. It was quite late and she had been pacing back and forth in front of the bed rather than going to sleep like a dutiful wife would have. "Where have you been?"

Lucius ignored her and began to prepare for bed.

"Why won't you tell me anything anymore?" she demanded angrily in a loud voice. "You're always gone, Draco has been acting even more arrogant and disdainful toward me ever since Christmas, and you still won't tell me where Bellatrix has been!"

"Your sister is dead." Lucius sneered as he pulled off his dragon-hide boots.

Unshed tears caused Narcissa's eyes to become bright. "How? Who?"

"She tried to escape from Azkaban and drowned." Lucius said coldly. He failed to mention that she had escaped with Harry Potter. It didn't matter now though. The Dark Lord was quite curious as to how they had done it- but that was beside the point.

"What was she doing there?" Narcissa said in an angry tone.

"She betrayed the Dark Lord and was accordingly punished." Malfoy told his wife vaguely. He smiled absently as he recalled his sister-in-law's shrieks as the enchanted whips had cut her skin many times. It was a shame that the Dark Lord had grown bored before they could get to more pleasurable pursuits.

Narcissa promptly came to the conclusion that Malfoy had probably been involved with 'punishing' her sister and that it had probably extended beyond the Unforgivable Curses. "How dare you?" she screamed at him.

Malfoy coldly stood up. "How dare you?" he whispered. He then slapped his wife as hard as he could. Again, and again, and again as she sobbed. After a while he finally left.

Narcissa stumbled over to the bed and tried to muffle her cries with a pillow. Tomorrow, she would go and find out who the Head of the Black Family was. Whoever he was, he could have her marriage canceled and her declared his ward. It was the only legal way to get out of the marriage thanks to the pre-nuptials. A loss of emancipation was better than staying married to Lucius. She only hoped that Draco wasn't the Head of House Black.

Chapter Eleven

Bellatrix put the finishing touches on Harry's 'costume' for his meeting at Gringotts. He had allowed her to dress him so that he would put on a good face at the meeting. She had chosen a pure black cloak fastened with a silver phoenix to go over his blue and silver robes. For effect, she draped a silver stole over his shoulders. A hood had been a necessity because Gringotts was a public location.

"Possibly as soon as next week," she explained to him, "you will have a tight grip on their economy. The alliance with Gringotts will of course contribute heavily- but you will also control the Daily Prophet and significant industries."

Harry nodded numbly. He had not expected to be going to Diagon Alley this soon. It was rather inconvenient to have such short notice, but he had gone to bed before Bellatrix had came home the night before. She had decided not to wake him up. He was extremely glad for her efforts on his behalf though. "How do we get there?" he asked.

"Apparate." Bellatrix answered. "But before you do that, we need to put a shadow charm on your hood there. It ensures that you aren't recognized by those who don't already know you, and makes you more enigmatic, which is good for now." She quickly performed the necessary charm and slipped her cloak, which still had its shadow charm intact, on.

They both pulled out their wands simultaneously and Apparated, appearing in a side street especially designated for those choosing to Apparate into Diagon Alley. Gringotts was quickly entered where they found a contingent of goblin guards waiting to escort them to the Head of Gringotts.

Harry and Bellatrix soon found themselves in a very large office with three very important looking goblins. The guards, sensing the discomfort of the humans, had elected to remain outside once it was established that they weren't there to harm anybody.

The goblin that appeared to be the youngest spoke. "Lord Polairix, Lady Polairix, may I present Lord Gold, the Head of Gringotts." Harry and Lord Gold exchanged ceremonious nods, both paying each other respect without demeaning themselves.

Lord Gold took the initiative to speak next and gestured to the goblin on his right, and then the one who had spoken first. "This is Lord Silver and Lord Bronze. Please be seated." Everyone sat down.

"Your wife said that you were interested in initiating an alliance with us, Polairix. What exactly did you have in mind?" Gold asked diplomatically.

Fortunately for Harry, Bellatrix had coached him as to what he should try to bargain for. Reggins had also had a lot to contribute to that conversation. Between his wife and secretary, a set of goals had been established.

Harry began with the first one. "Although a Goblin Rebellion has not occurred for some time, I would be much obliged if our access to the bank remained secure should such an event occur. In return, I am willing to commit to being on your side during such a rebellion and doing everything in my power to help you."

"Let it be so." Lord Gold intoned and then took a bite at the proverbial apple. "The goblins wish to have the right to ask for asylum under your domain at any time. In return, Gringotts will gladly shelter and protect any agent of the House of Polairix at any time."

Catching onto how to negotiate with goblins, Harry then responded. "Let it be so."

This formal bargaining continued until they were soon nitpicking over tiny details that were mostly insignificant, but were still necessary for the alliance to be complete. As soon as Harry and Lord Gold formally ended the session, a parchment with the whole agreement appeared on the table before them. Quills and ink soon joined and the alliance was signed.

Lord Gold shook Harry's hand. "A pleasure, Lord Polairix. Gringotts will leave it to you to decide when this shall become public knowledge."

"We'll have to see how events come to pass." Harry said vaguely, unsure himself as to when he would reveal his identity and new connections.

The Head of Gringotts nodded understandingly. "Have a nice day."

Harry nodded and he and Bellatrix soon found themselves walking hand-in-hand down one of the banks' hall toward the main entrance. They could then Apparate from the street outside. Several of the goblins they passed gave very respectful nods to the cloaked and hooded couple.

"You did marvelously." Bellatrix breathed proudly to Harry. "You're a natural at diplomacy. I doubt that anyone else could have gotten so much out of them."

"Only because you helped me beforehand." Harry said, squeezing her hand lightly.

She shook her head in disagreement. "You have a natural way of getting along with non-humans. I could tell that those goblins were very impressed with your manners. That skill will come in handy with the Ice People. They're not exactly human and they are rather conscious of it."

"Really?" Harry asked, curious about the Ice People. He was about to ask more when he was interrupted by a goblin who had apparently been doing everything in his power to catch them before they left the bank.

"Lord Polairix," panted the goblin, "some business of a personal nature has arisen. Could you come with me for a few moments."

"Of course." Harry answered, in a slightly confused voice.

The goblin led he and Bellatrix to a nearby office. When they entered, much to Harry and Bellatrix's surprise, they found a very dejected looking Narcissa Malfoy slumped in one of the chairs. From the look of her face, she had been in some sort of fight.

Bellatrix's grip on Harry's tightened as she laid eyes on her sister. Harry wasn't sure how to interpret that. Undoubtedly, she was surprised. But what did she think of her sister? They both sat down at the goblin's invitation next to Narcissa who seemed to be trying to ascertain Harry and Bellatrix's identity.

"I don't know if you're aware, sir," the goblin began nervously, "but you are the Head of House Black due to the circumstances of last June."

Harry nodded slowly. He wasn't quite sure what that had to do with Narcissa Malfoy though. He knew that she had formerly been a Black, but she was married now. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Bellatrix's head slump. She was the reason he was the Head of House Black after all. He gave her hand a comforting squeeze.

The goblin elected to continue on. "Your position lays several responsibilities at your feet, one of which comes into play today."

"I see." Harry said as he glanced at Narcissa and then back to the goblin. "Which one is that?"

"The pre-nuptial agreement between Lucius Malfoy and his wife, Narcissa, dictate that the only way she can get out of the marriage is if the Head of House Black or the Head of House Malfoy has the marriage contact canceled. If House Black cancels the contract, Narcissa loses her emancipation and becomes a ward of you. She wants out of the marriage due to the fact that her husband has become . . . rather abusive." The goblin explained.

Harry looked at Narcissa thoughtfully. "I'm not sure that I understand what you mean by 'ward.'"

"In essence, she becomes your daughter. You manage her affairs, see that she is taught what she needs to know, and anything else you see fit to do for a period of at least three years. Her emancipation is returned at your discretion after that period of time."

Harry looked at Bellatrix who still had her head bowed. What did she think of this whole thing? It was her sister, she would of course have some sort of opinion. Finally, he responded. "Is there a place where my wife and I could discuss this?"

"Of course." The goblin gestured to a room just off his office. "Be my guest."

"Milady?" Harry asked, not wanting to reveal her identity. He stood up and she followed him into the small room and shut the door. Harry lowered his hood so that they could have a face to face discussion. After a moment she lowered hers as well. "What do you think?"

Bellatrix shrugged indifferently, not really meeting his eyes. "You're the Head of House Black, not me."

"You're my wife. She is your sister."

She crossed her arms indifferently and looked the other way. "It's not my decision, and I don't really care. Lucius probably beat the snot out of her. She isn't doing this because she 'saw the light.' She doesn't want to deal with Lucius. At best, she will be like an extremely difficult teenage daughter."

"We can give her a chance to 'see the light.'" Harry replied. No response. He then sighed deeply. "I think that we should probably give her a chance. It's an opportunity we shouldn't pass up. We should also give her the chance to know who we are. Lucius might be a better alternative than I am. Let's get back." They returned their hoods to their place.

They returned and sat down. Narcissa looked rather apprehensive now. Harry addressed the goblin. "We've decided to cancel the marriage contract, providing that she still wants escape the marriage

after we reveal something to her. Would you be so kind as to give the three of us a moment of privacy?"

The goblin bowed and left the room. Harry stood up, followed by Bellatrix, and they both lowered their hoods. Narcissa's face whitened when she saw Harry Potter and her supposedly dead sister standing before her. "If you do this, you're stuck with us." Harry said.

"I'm getting out of Lucius's life no matter what." Narcissa said in a desperate voice that was tinged with disdain. She couldn't believe that she was in this situation. "He's been physically abusing me lately. I haven't always agreed with some of his darker activities." She unconsciously glanced at Bellatrix who had probably been punished at the hands of Lucius as well. Bellatrix quickly looked away.

Harry and Bellatrix pulled their hoods up just as the goblin returned. "Have the three of you agreed on a specific action?"

"Yes, cancel the contract. We'll take Narcissa on as our ward." Harry said. The goblin promptly began to draw up some documents. "What of her son? How will this affect him?" Harry asked.

The goblin looked up from the divorce papers he was working on. "Guardianship automatically reverts to the father in this case. If Lucius Malfoy becomes incapacitated, his will will dictate who guardianship goes to. You can fight for custody if it isn't to a family member."

A moment later, the goblin had Harry sign the papers and then formally announced that the marriage was now officially dissolved. He then turned his attention to Narcissa. "You will now need to surrender your wand to Lord Polairix. I'm quite sure that he'll give it back at some point in time." She did so grudgingly. Harry pocketed it.

"I believe that is all." the goblin said as they all stood up.

Harry nodded and changed his plans for how to return to Nair'icaix. He found a glove in his cloak pocket and made a simple Portkey from

it. He had not mastered that skill to perfection yet. "Everyone grab hold."

A short jerk later, they were standing in the main hall of Harry's fortress. He looked from Bellatrix to Narcissa somewhat nervously. The two sisters stood deliberately avoiding each other's gaze all while darting glances toward the other.

After a long and uncomfortable moment, Bellatrix broke the silence. "Mrs. Higgin!" she barked.

The housekeeper that had been hired with the other employees promptly made her way into the main entrance hall. She detected the bad attitudes and immediately singled out the person who wasn't likely to bite her head off. "Yes, my lord?"

"Um . . . This is Narcissa M . .Black." Harry explained. "She's now my ward. Please find her a room and have lunch served to her. After that, make sure she remains in that room until I or my wife have a discussion with her. Once that's over, we'll see where to go next."

Mrs. Higgin nodded and imperiously led Narcissa away as Harry followed a very sulky Bellatrix up to their bedroom. She shoved the door open and entered with Harry on her heels before she slammed it shut. He stood and used magic to remove his cloak as she stalked over to her closet and began to change clothes.

Silence reigned until Harry realized that it was up to him to figure out what was wrong. This was not going to be one of his favorite 'husbandly duties.' "What's got you so angry?" he inquired with a placating voice.

Bellatrix's hands froze just as they were about to remove her robe. She took her time to answer. When she did, it was in a curt tone. "It's my fault he's dead. My fault that you're the head of House Black."

"Oh." Harry said. He would normally use Legillimency, but he felt that it would be an intrusion upon his wife's privacy- so, he attempted to resist the urge. However, her emotions were so strong that he

could feel the overpowering wave of guilt coming from her. For some reason, the guilt was joined by jealousy as well.

Apparently she had expected more than an ‘oh’ from him and after giving him a short period to respond continued on loud and awkwardly. “Well? Is that all you have to say? I killed him!”

“But you’re my wife. I love you.” Harry said, at a loss for words, not quite sure what could be said to calm her down and assure her of his good feelings for her. She may have done the deed, but it was he that had led Sirius to the Department of Mysteries. Not only that, a stunner had been used, not the Killing Curse. Besides, he had realized that there was no point in living in the past. It saved one a lot of anger and misery to look forward.

“I’m your wife only because of a stupid accident.” Bellatrix screamed. “If you had been in a position to choose, would you have married your godfather’s murderer? If someone had killed a person I loved, I would despise them for as long as I lived! I would torture them and then kill them.”

Harry shrugged. He did have to admit that they were in some unusual circumstances. “It’s in the past though, isn’t it? If we love each other, it doesn’t matter. I love you, don’t you love me?” He whispered.

Bellatrix then began to cry uncontrollably. “Yes, I love you with all my heart. I would die a thousand times for you. It’s the least you deserve from me. You’re a good person with kindness that comes naturally to nearly everyone you meet. I don’t deserve you.”

The guilt didn’t seem to be quite as violent as it had been before, but jealousy was coming off in waves now. She was jealous of Narcissa for some reason. “What does your sister have to do with this?” Harry asked.

“She never was a Death Eater.” Bellatrix mumbled despondently. “She never killed a soul in her life. Pride is a major failing of her character, but at least she isn’t evil. Her husband beat her.” Bellatrix’s voice then gained some strength. “I’ve killed and tortured innocents! I

deserve to be hit, punched, and slapped repeatedly. Not her. It isn't fair." She then burst into a fresh fit of tears.

Harry finally gave into the temptation to use Legillimency. The most obvious thing that popped up was her extreme guilt for Sirius's death. She also felt guilty for having a better husband than Narcissa formerly had possessed because she felt that her sister was a better person. Despite this, she fiercely regarded Harry's as hers and hated herself for that. She thought that she was being selfish. Her greatest fear and jealousy seemed to be that Harry might like Narcissa better.

He walked over to her and took her head in his hands and forced her to look at him. "The fact that you feel guilty shows that you aren't evil. You love me and that's the greatest thing anybody could give me. Your crimes are in the past and I don't hold them against you." he said forcefully. "I love you and you alone. You're the queen of my heart." He then kissed her lightly on the lips and then pulled back to see how she would react.

Bellatrix's violet eyes looked back at his green ones blankly. The only difference in her that Harry could discern was that the jealousy had been wiped away and that her guilt had drastically faded. A trace that would likely never go away remained. He didn't think that it would overpower her though.

Abruptly, she raised her arms and shoved Harry forcefully onto their bed. Before he knew what was happening, she was on top of him and kissing him passionately as her hands clutched him as tightly as possible.

Chapter 12

Narcissa finished buttoning up one of the robes that she had found hanging in the wardrobe. The room that Mrs. Higgin had led her to was not particularly large, but it reeked of elegance and wealth in an obscure sort of way. It was too bad that the robes, which fit her perfectly, were not quite as fancy as she had come to be accustomed to.

The narrow window near the average-sized bed soon attracted her attention and she stepped over to look out of it. Though it was too narrow to really get a good view, it became apparent that the castle that Harry Potter and her sister resided in was on a bleak island which would be rained on in the near future.

Harry ‘The-Boy-Who-Lived’ Potter and her sister. Despite her attempt to get it out of her mind by doing various things such as combing her hair, eating lunch, and changing her clothes, she couldn’t get the thought out of her mind.

What was going on with Bellatrix? What attracted her to the shorter-than-average boy? Through indirect study, Narcissa had been able to see that Potter seemed to have developed some wiry muscles and looked slightly older than his sixteen years. Not necessarily very attractive though. Maybe it was the green eyes. They made her rather uncomfortable, but maybe Bellatrix found them to be intriguing. Narcissa decided that she would never be able to feel at ease in the presence of Harry Potter.

It would certainly be interesting to find out what was going on between the two. She sighed and decided to lay down on the bed. Not only was Harry Potter her brother-in-law, he was now her guardian. She desperately hoped that it was a good thing. Did he hold grudges? Probably. Would he let her get away with what she wanted? Probably not.

A knock sounded on the door and Narcissa sat up on the bed alarmed. Potter had said that he or his wife would be having a ‘discussion’ with her sometime after lunch. Narcissa wasn’t sure who

she preferred it to be. A meeting with Bellatrix would be awkward, one with Potter would be frightening. "Come in." she squeaked.

The door opened and Bellatrix entered alone looking considerably more pleasantly disposed than when they had parted a couple of hours earlier. She shut it behind her and studied Narcissa who was sitting on the bed looking like a startled animal. Both sisters looked different from what they remembered.

Bellatrix observed that Narcissa appeared to have aged a little. She had made every effort to maintain her good looks though. Her blonde hair was still as captivating as it had been at Hogwarts and her figure had not wasted away either, though her curves had never been as good as Bellatrix's.

Narcissa was shocked to see that Bellatrix appeared to be at least ten years younger than she was supposed to be. Her face had lost the signs of aging that came with growing older, her hair which was done in a pony-tail was more vibrant and healthy than it had ever been, and her violet eyes glowed with a happiness that few ever achieved.

"I suppose you're wondering how it is that I'm married to the arch-enemy of Lord Voldemort." Bellatrix said, to start the discussion.

Narcissa nodded carefully. Bellatrix seemed to be perfectly happy and content, but the whole marriage thing could actually be a touchy subject. Bellatrix's attitude back at the bank certainly indicated that this was the case, but such hints had vanished.

"After killing Sirius," Bellatrix explained, "I felt an extreme sense of guilt and resolved to try and make some sort of restitution. I began to send secret information to Harry . . ." The story continued to detail Azkaban, their impromptu marriage, and covered their actions since. ". . . and now you're here." she finished.

"So you're no longer a Death Eater then." Narcissa asked doubtfully. The whole story seemed to fantastic to be real, but she couldn't help but feel grudgingly pleased for her sister's good fortune.

Bellatrix nodded, her eyes bright with unshed tears of joy. "I've been given another chance to do good at the side of the best man in the world." She abruptly pulled her sleeves up to reveal a pair of unblemished wrists. "The Dark Mark is gone too."

"When did that happen?"

"After I arrived here."

They continued to discuss various things and caught up on each other's lives. It was a sisterly conversation, but both sisters were subtly trying to dig out important information from the other. After a while, Bellatrix decided that Narcissa didn't know much about the Death Eaters and Narcissa decided that Bellatrix wasn't going to let anything vaguely useful slip.

Finally, Narcissa brought up the all-important topic that had overshadowed their whole conversation, though it wasn't much of a concern for Bellatrix. "What are you and your husband going to do with me?"

"You'll live here for at least three years." Bellatrix responded carefully. "Harry has decided that he'll protect you and help you in any way he can. However, you need to keep an open mind and learn how to respect people."

"What about my wand?" Narcissa frowned.

"Once you earn his trust and respect, he will return your wand to you. Until then, you're not allowed to do magic." Bellatrix answered, not mentioning that Harry probably thought Narcissa to be a spy for Voldemort. If she was in his position, it would be stupid not to.

Narcissa sighed bitterly as rebellious thoughts and impulses shot through her mind.. "He expects a lot."

"If you say so." Bellatrix commented. "When you feel like eating dinner or any other meal, politely ask one of the servants to assist

you. Harry and I will not be around for a few days due to prior engagements. When everything is cleared up Harry will probably want to talk to you sometime, so practice your good manners. You may explore the castle, but stay out of Harry's two studies, my study, and the library unless invited." She then left Narcissa to her own devices for the rest of the afternoon.

Section break

"Be welcome to Savvire." Queen Xerina IV said formally with a curtsy as soon as Harry and Bellatrix simultaneously Apparated into her private meeting chamber. Harry nodded to her as he gaped at his surroundings. The building they were in seemed to be made entirely of ice or crystal. Maybe both.

"Thank you for your invitation." Harry said, not quite as formally. He had not been raised that way. "We've been looking forward to this visit."

Xerina smiled at him. "The pleasure is ours, my lord. My people are most anxious to see you. However, before we get onto that, I thought that we might take a moment for me to explain some basic social situations that you should be aware of now that you are our overlord." She gestured to several chairs that had been set up.

"I would be delighted to learn more about the Ice People." Harry stated as he and Bellatrix sat down across from where Xerina chose to sit.

"I suppose that I should begin with our history." Xerina mused. "The Ice People have existed since before pre-historic times. We thrived during the Ice Age and even after it died out. However, humans began to populate the planet. This became a serious problem when wizards and witches started practicing a certain brand of magic. Not only were they unpleasantly disposed toward us, but we had a most difficult time standing up to them. The Arctic soon became our home."

"So you're not human at all?" Bellatrix asked in a curious voice.

Xerina shook her head negatively. "Human blood flows through our veins. That is of course the next part of the story. After a great many years of isolation in the Arctic, it became apparent that we would have to . . . breed with wizards to give our race the magical power to survive."

"Let me guess," Harry said, "the House of Polairix became involved. Am I connected to the Ice People by blood?"

A blush bloomed on Xerina's face. "Yes, but not as closely as you might imagine. The leaders of the Ice People decided to breed just as wizards and witches were trying to establish their own private realms. At that time, two prominent wizards were fighting for dominance in Britain. Duke George and Baron Evane. They were both powerful wizards and both had good character and the Ice People could see that one of them would eventually lose the fight.

"So you picked one of them?" Bellatrix guessed.

Xerina nodded affirmatively. "Yes. Baron Evane had a special affinity for magical creatures, so we approached him with a proposal. The North islands, seas, and Arctic consisted of a large amount of land and contained many magical creatures. An alliance between he and our people would give him enough power to dominate the North completely."

"And what was the price?" Harry asked, already guessing.

Xerina's normally pale composure was scarlet now. "He would mate with women of the Ice People until he had provided us with fifteen of his daughters. Male children, which the Ice women rarely bore when mated with a human, were pure human, so we also bargained that he would be able to keep any boys."

Harry and Bellatrix were now blushing as well. "I take it he accepted the proposal." Harry said.

"Yes, he did." Xerina replied. "He was skeptical until we promised that he would be allowed to marry the Ice woman who bore him a son.

He provided us with fifteen daughters. In return we bound ourselves to him and his line. We are like the House-Sprites that reside in Nair'icaix. We serve you, and in return, you make us powerful enough to serve you better."

"I see." Harry said slowly. "Where did Nair'icaix and the Polairix name come from then?"

"The Ice People built the fortress for your family. To signify your connection to us, you were formally made the House of Polairix."

"Did the wizard blood change the Ice People?" Bellatrix asked.

A smile crossed Xerina's lips. "Yes, it did. It made us much more powerful and for that we are eternally grateful to Lord Polairix I."

"Wouldn't the blood get thinner as time wore on?" Harry asked, trying to figure out the whole concept in hid mind.

"The wizard blood does not die out as quickly as would be expected." Xerina responded. "Several Lords of Polairix took Ice women to be their wives and sent their daughters to live with us and every once in a while a wizard comes North and we convince him to stay. Thanks to that, our blood is stable for now, although- If you had not been married when you inherited your birthright, I would have offered all of my daughters to be your wives."

"I'm honored." Harry said as diplomatically as possible. It was just too strange for him to swallow.

Xerina smiled happily at him. "I can see that you are happily married however. Anyway, the point of the story is that now that your line has been restored to its dominion, we will automatically gain power and strength from your presence. The Ice People welcome you back, my lord. Our armies are most anxious to serve you."

"Armies?"

“Yes, we train extensively in the arts of war; it’s what we’re best at. We wouldn’t dare venture from the North unless you led us however. It wouldn’t be safe. Our power is only effective against wizards and witches when a wizard is at our head, and you are the only one we would follow.”

“I see.” Harry said.

Xerina stood up and led them to a pair of pure glass doors that led out onto a balcony. “It’s time to meet the Ice People, my lord. We are the most numerous and loyal of the North and we live to serve.”

She opened the doors and stepped out onto the balcony with Harry and Bellatrix at her side. Harry quickly observed that they were quite high up over a gigantic city square that was filled to capacity with an overflow going down many main streets. They were all looking at him and the Queen expectantly.

“People of Savvire!” boomed Queen Xerina IV’s magically enhanced voice. “All Hail Harry James Potter- the Earl of the North.”

Cheers sounded, silver confetti dropped from everywhere, and fireworks were set off. Harry was pleased to see that they accepted him wholeheartedly, although he was worried that he might go deaf.

A/N: Sorry about the short chapter, that's just the way it turned out. To make up for it, I'll give you an extremely short preview of the next chapter which is a solid 3,000 words. . .

Chapter 13: Smackdown at the Ministry. . .

Chapter 13

Harry inspected the seven Ice soldiers that Queen Xerina had insisted escort him back to Nair'icaix and to remain his bodyguards on permanent assignment while his wife watched from the background. According to Xerina, they were the most highly skilled of the top divisions in her army. They had not demonstrated their skills as of yet, but when they walked, it reminded Harry of cats stalking their prey.

Despite Harry's friendly overtures, they remained as formal as ever and now stood in a straight line as their pale eyes watched Harry. Their uniform consisted of silver robes that seemed to flow like an Invisibility Cloak, black breastplates, shin-guards, and dragon-hide boots. All seven had their silver hair cropped into similar styles.

After satisfying his curiosity he addressed their leader, Captain Nailoff. "We'll Apparate into the main entrance point at the Ministry of Magic. Once we do that, our goal is to look as imposing as possible. I don't expect any trouble. However, if anything happens- follow my lead."

Nailoff nodded to show that he understood. "As you wish, my lord."

Bellatrix stepped forward and cast some charms on Harry and his cloak as soon as he pulled the hood over his head. Harry was dressed in pure black with a hood that hid his face from view. Bellatrix had also suggested that he wear black gloves to further disguise him. Overall, Harry decided that he would not like to meet himself in a dark alley.

"Do you remember everything that I told you?" she asked.

"Yes, but I wish that you would go with me." Harry answered. Bellatrix had spent endless hours telling him precisely how to manipulate Fudge and how to counter every possible move he might plan was to blackmail him with certain documents that she had somehow gotten her hands on. If Fudge wouldn't cooperate with him, he would publish them in the Daily Prophet, which he now owned.

She shook her head. "Not this time, Harry. It would spoil your appearance. A disguised woman is much more interesting than a disguised man. If I came with you this time, you would have to share his attention with me."

"I don't mind sharing."

"That's not the point." she said as she pecked him on the lips quickly. "Be sure to tell me about it when you get back though."

"I will." Harry promised. He pulled his Black Ash wand from his cloak and gave it a short wave in order to Apparate. He had gotten to the point where he didn't really have to vocalize his spells all that much.

He reappeared in the Ministry's atrium and seven similar pops behind him signified that his bodyguards had safely arrived behind him. Quickly returning the wand to his cloak, he arrogantly strode past the security desk with its shocked guard, and ducked into an empty elevator.

As soon as the doors closed, he used his wandless skills to sense the mechanics of the spells that operated the elevator and manipulated them to skip the floors between the atrium and the floor Fudge was on.

The elevator zoomed toward its destination and arrived with a jerk. The doors clanged open to reveal a large area filled with desks filled with various aides and assistants. They all looked up to see who the arrival was and were shocked to watch as a hooded figure and seven strange looking men stepped into the room.

Harry spied a large set of double doors and correctly assumed that they led to Minister Fudge's office. He and his bodyguards effortlessly passed through the sea of workers who were only now beginning to protest his presence.

With a little wandless magic, the double doors slammed open with a crash and Harry was admitted into a plush reception room. Percy Weasley was sitting at one of the few desks in front of the door that

led to Fudges office and he stared at the entourage in a rather shocked manner.

He soon regained his countenance and put a very self-important expression on his face. “The Minister is quite busy at this moment. I’m afraid that you will have to schedule an appointment for some later time.”

For some reason, Harry wanted to laugh. However, he restrained himself and spoke. “I don’t care how busy your incompetent minister is. Tell him that the Lord of Polairix is here to see him.” This all came out in a very loud, yet frosty whisper, courtesy of some of the charms that Bellatrix had used on him.

Percy, desperately trying to retain some sense of nerve, quickly stood up and disappeared behind the door that led to Fudge’s office. He appeared a moment later, looking very flustered. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said, emphasizing the ‘sir,’ despite the fact that Harry’s proper address was ‘my lord,’ “you will need to make an appointment.”

Harry began to slowly step toward Percy, saying nothing. When they were nearly face to face, with Percy desperately trying to see through the charm that hid Harry’s face, Harry finally spoke. “I don’t think so.” Then, with a casual wave of his wand, he sent Percy flying to the other side of the office.

Another wave, and the door to Fudge’s office flew open and the group made their way through to find a very nervous Fudge using his desk as a barricade. “Don’t come any closer or I’ll be forced to use magic against you!” he cried.

“Get up.” Harry commanded as a bodyguard closed the door behind them. “I’m here to discuss Azkaban and my other decrees as you have likely guessed by now.” Harry said.

Fudge was stupid enough to sneer at Harry. “Azkaban remains under the control of this Ministry! There is nothing you can do that will make me decide otherwise. Even if you kill me, my successor will never allow it!”

“The Ministry will get off of Azkaban. Do you know why?”

“No.”

Harry pulled a document that the goblins had owled him from his cloak and showed it to Fudge. “This certifies that I am the sole owner with managing control over the Daily Prophet.”

“I fail to see your point, Mr. Polairix.” Fudge replied, at the very least acknowledging that the document was indeed valid.

This time, a large sheaf of papers came out of Harry’s cloak. “These are copies of the Smythe Memos and the records of one Dolores Umbridge. They illustrate, in express detail, the facts that you knew the Dark Wizard Voldemort had indeed returned, yet deliberately ignored it, and they also detail the multiple felonies Umbridge has committed- with your full knowledge. If they were to be published in the Daily Prophet, you and anyone else named ‘Fudge’ would be ruined forever.”

“How did you get those?” Fudge yelled.

“That doesn’t matter.” Harry replied, annoyed. “If you fail to turn Azkaban over to me immediately and fail to come into compliance with my perfectly legitimate demands, these papers will be published in the Daily Prophet.”

Fudge was at a disadvantage, yet his anger overrode any common sense he had. “I’ll shut down the Daily Prophet!” he roared.

“You can’t shut the newspaper down until it screams your misdeeds to the general public. By that time it would be too late anyway.”

Finally admitting defeat, Fudge sighed. “It’ll take me a couple of months to properly turn control of Azkaban over to you.”

“If you aren’t off Azkaban by Saturday afternoon, these documents go to press for the Sunday edition of the Daily Prophet.” Harry said,

knowing full well that it wouldn't take as long as Fudge was making it out to be.

"Two weeks then?"

"Saturday."

"Saturday it is." Fudge sighed.

"Good." Harry whispered. "Don't mess with me again. I also expect you to comply with my other decrees." He turned and left the office with the bodyguards following, leaving the incriminating memos on Fudge's desk. Bellatrix had made several duplicates, and he personally doubted that he'd be able to use them again. Fudge would expose himself slowly to prevent being blackmailed with them again.

Not wishing to remain any longer in the Ministry, Harry and his bodyguards returned to Nair'icaix . He dismissed them to return to their normal posts and made his way to his private study where he arranged with Bess, Tess, and Reggins to have the appropriate personnel prepared to take over Azkaban for Saturday, which was approaching quickly.

After signing off a few documents, and writing a letter to Snape detailing the latest news to be shared with Lupin, Tonks, Moody, and to some extent- Neville, he decided that he might as well begin his drills early. His plans were disrupted when the door opened to admit a very cross looking Bellatrix who physically escorted a sulky Narcissa in.

"Sit." Bellatrix commanded. Narcissa disagreeably sat in a chair across from Harry's desk and did her best to pretend that he was not present. After seeing this lack of acknowledgment on Narcissa's part, Bellatrix scowled. "Tell Harry what you just did!"

"I called one of the servants a half-breed." Narcissa mumbled.

Harry arched on of his eyebrows. For some reason he wasn't particularly surprised, but that didn't mean that he was happy about it

however. He inwardly sighed at the irony of having his wife asking him to discipline a woman who was probably twice his age at the very least. Finally he uttered the only thing he could think of. "Indeed?"

Bellatrix nodded. "Yes, she did. She also refuses to apologize. I'll let you deal with this alone." She strode from the room and closed the door with a bang. It was a nice show, however- Harry's ring told him that she was waiting outside the door and was in the process of casting an eavesdropping charm. She seemed to want Narcissa to regard Harry as the authority figure, but was also curious. He appreciated the gesture, though the eavesdropping did put make him slightly uncomfortable.

"Why did you do it?" Harry asked.

Narcissa looked at him defiantly. "Because that's who he is. A half-breed."

Righteous anger was beginning to surge through Harry's veins and somehow, Narcissa could feel it. From the way her eyes widened after the fact, she probably wished to take her answer back. Harry suppressed his anger before responding. "What makes you think you're any better than that servant is?"

"They're servants! They have to work for their wages. We were born with money, therefore that makes us better! It's the same with Muggles. We were born with magic. We ARE superior!" Narcissa yelled.

Harry was shocked at her opinions. He vowed to himself that he would purge them from her and anyone else he could find in the world. First things first though. "You will apologize to that servant." Harry directed.

"I will do no such thing."

"You will."

"I won't!"

‘Uncle Vernon would have beaten the tar out of me by now.’ Harry reflected to himself silently as he observed his dis-obedient ward sitting across from him as he contemplated what action he should take.

Several ideas occurred to him, ranging from grounding her to taking her over his lap- strange as it would be. To be honest, his knowledge of child-raising skills came from what little he had heard from other children during his stint at a Muggle school. Parenting skills witnessed and heard about at Hogwarts were for those who were older than Narcissa was acting.

Finally, Harry had an epiphany. One learned through experience, Narcissa would be no different.“From this point on,” he declared, “you will work as a servant. Not only that, you will work to pay for your room and board here at Nair’icaix. What you eat and how you live will be determined by how well you work. Not only that, you will not use or benefit from magic in any way unless I decide to make exceptions.”

“What?” exclaimed Narcissa, pale as a sheet. “You can’t do that! You’re my ward and you have to care for me!”

“You’re also older than seventeen.” Harry commented dryly. “If it makes you feel any better, you can tell people that I’m your parole office instead of guardian.”

“I refuse!”

Harry looked at her quietly and then responded. “You have no other choice.”

Like clockwork, Bellatrix entered and closed the discussion. She put on a good show of asking what had happened and what was going to be done. After Harry ‘told’ her everything, she called for Bess who agreed to take Narcissa to Mrs. Higgin. If Narcissa wanted dinner, she would have to get at least an hour or so of work in.

After the door closed behind Bess and Narcissa, Bellatrix sat on Harry's desk and beamed at him. "You're an absolute genius! Personally, I would have. . . well. . . anyway- making her work will do wonders I'm sure."

"I just hope it works." Harry commented.

"Of course it will. That was the best display of parenting that I've ever seen." There was a lull in the room as Bellatrix studied Harry thoughtfully, a small smile and a faraway look coming into her eyes. "You would make a good father, Harry."

"It was just a lucky idea." Harry said. "The Dursley's weren't exactly good role-models."

"Perhaps." Bellatrix said absently. "Don't forget your drills. I'll come down later to do some practice duels with you, for all the good it will do. You've already surpassed me."

Section break

Snape disguised his laughter with a hacking cough as he passed a group of wary looking students on his way to the Headmaster's office. Because of his connection with Potter's Legion, most of the Gryffindors were now not so hateful of him. Other students still looked on him with suspicion though.

Due to Potter's communication that he had received earlier, Snape knew precisely what this emergency Order meeting was going to be about. Ironically, there was nothing the Order could do that would have any significant effect.

He smirked as he watched Weasley and Granger, who had come from the opposite direction, step past the gargoyle that guarded the office and go up. He shortly followed and joined the rest of the Order in the conference room that adjoined Dumbledore's office.

After everyone had arrived and sat themselves at the table, Dumbledore spoke gravely. "It has come to my attention through

some of my contacts in the Ministry that Lord Polairix called on Minister Fudge this morning.”

“Did anybody recognize him?” Ron asked quickly, before the aged professor could continue.

“He was cloaked and hooded.” Dumbledore answered. “His bodyguards had silver hair and silver battle robes. None of the bodyguards were known to us.”

“What happened during the visit?” Hermione asked, hoping to get the meeting back on track.

Dumbledore looked at each Order member before proceeding on. “Lord Polairix successfully ‘convinced’ Fudge to give up Azkaban and come into compliance with his other decrees. I believe that Polairix used some sort of force or compelling power to persuade Fudge to give it up. He was dead set on keeping it earlier this week.”

“He has to be stopped!” shrieked Mrs. Weasley. “If some man can just walk into the Ministry without resistance and force the Minister of Magic to do anything, what prevents him from walking into Hogwarts and killing all the students in their beds!”

Snape rolled his eyes. “Calm down woman! There’s nothing to suggest that Lord Polairix is a Dark wizard of any sort.”

“How would you know?” Ron said acidly in defense of his mom.

“I AM a Dark wizard, Weasley!”

“ENOUGH!” Dumbledore said loudly. “We will get nowhere if we continue to argue like this. Tonks, Moody? You two are Aurors, what are your opinions as to Lord Polairix’s alignment in regard to Dark or Light? Is Polairix a Dark wizard?”

After observing Snape discreetly shake his head, Tonks answered. “He certainly hasn’t done anything that is against the law. For now, let’s give him the benefit of the doubt.”

Before anyone could object, Moody added his support. "Being imposing enough to convince Fudge to do something isn't a sign of anything at all. Innocent until proven guilty. I assume that you've already had Fudge tested for the Imperious Curse and found it to be negative."

"Fudge isn't under any sort of curse right now." Dumbledore stated. "I propose that we bide our time and see what happens. If any of you hear anything about Lord Polairix, report it to me. We need him on our side if we want to bring Voldemort down. Any other business?"

Kingsley Shacklebolt raised his hand. "Fudge is still having us search for Harry Potter and Bellatrix Black. There have been no sightings whatsoever of the two prisoners, separate or together.

"Harry didn't know how to swim." Ron said darkly. "He probably drowned. At least, I hope he did. That traitor."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hermione. "Don't talk like that!"

"I'm intrigued by the escape, actually." Arthur Weasley said. "Both he and Bellatrix Black at the same time. There's no doubt that they were working together. Sirius escaped from Azkaban, but only because he knew he was innocent."

"Your point?" asked another Order member.

Mr. Weasley looked ruffled. "Just thinking." he mumbled.

"What would we do even if we did find Harry and Bellatrix Black?" Hermione asked. "Lord Polairix is taking over Azkaban. Could we trust him to keep Harry imprisoned?"

"Just kill him and be done with it." Ron growled.

Snape raised his eyebrows in surprise. Young Ronald was turning into an unmitigated idiot faster than he could count to ten. Maybe young Weasley needed some humbling. "How is your Defense

Association coming along? I'm sure all of us here would like to see as many Hogwarts students as possible trained for Defense."

Ron turned red as a beet. "Well, there's been a bit of a snag there." he mumbled, not quite so puffed up as he had been.

"What kind of snag, Mr. Weasley?" asked Professor McGonagall.

"The students are no longer coming to our meetings." Hermione announced on the behalf of Ron who was looking too embarrassed to do answer for himself. "It's probably because Harry isn't in charge anymore. He did have popular appeal."

"Curious." Dumbledore said.

Hermione looked around at the people sitting at the table. They didn't seem to impressed with them. Maybe one of her own observations would save them face. "I have reason to believe that certain students have formed their own Defense club. I don't know who's in charge, but students seem to disappear for an hour or two at least once or twice a week."

"What?" Ron sputtered in surprise. "Someone else has stolen my position?"

"It would seem that way." Snape sneered at Ron. The git deserved to be brought down a few pegs. And he had always thought Potter to be arrogant. Now Potter was quite possibly the most powerful wizard in the world and he was ten times less arrogant than Weasley.

"Discreetly look into this." Dumbledore said to Ron and Hermione. "Try to find out precisely what's going on. I'll put Severus here in charge of the investigation. If you find anything of significance, report it to him. If there is a club, they won't be suspicious that way."

Snape's lips quirked as he looked at Ron and Hermione. "Good luck."

Chapter 14

As the sun set, Harry took a good look at his watch with satisfaction. Seven o'clock. By now the Aurors were leaving Azkaban and his wardens and Ice soldiers were instituting control over the island. Upon hearing about Azkaban, Xerina had promised to send more soldiers to help Harry in the morning. For now, the squad that had been acting as Harry's bodyguards would run Azkaban with the wardens.

He was soon joined by Bellatrix who stood next to him and watched the sun set over the dark blue sea as it crashed against the rocks that made up the island Nair'icaix sat on. Watching the sunset was something the couple had taken up.

"Any trouble with Narcissa?" Harry inquired. The past few days had seen some misbehavior from her despite the fact that she somehow managed to get her assigned chores done. After her outburst the day before, Bellatrix had volunteered to deal with her privately. Whatever she had done must have worked.

"None whatsoever." Bellatrix answered with a grin.

Harry nodded idly. Now that Narcissa was concentrating on the task at hand, she might be able to learn something about 'servants' and Muggles. "That's good."

There was a long pause during which Bellatrix took Harry's hand as the sun dipped below the horizon. She was about to say something when they were interrupted by Tess who came running down the hall, panting heavily.

"My lord- Azkaban is under attack!"

Section Break

"So, what are you going to teach us at the next Legion meeting?" Parvati asked Neville- cursing herself for the inability to carry on a

vaguely interesting conversation. It was horridly embarrassing to be incapable of a decent conversation.

It was Hogsmeade weekend. In an effort to throw off any potential attacks, the Hogwarts staff had taken to changing the Hogsmeade hours periodically so as to confuse Voldemort. This one had been scheduled for the evening. Snape had informed Neville that the next one would likely be in the early morning.

“Well, Professor Lupin recommended some rather ingenious shield charms that I thought we should all give a try.” Neville said vaguely as he sipped his Butterbeer. “For those who pick them up quickly, we can try some extremely advanced summoning charms so that one can block spells with other things.”

Parvati nodded, feeling rather dumb for some reason. They were on a date and instead of being romantic, they were acting like they did in school. She sighed and looked around the Three Broomsticks. Ron and Hermione were here as well, and they weren’t being shy.

Finally, she decided to get her own romance moving. “Neville? Do you . . . like me?” As soon as the words left her mouth, she regretted them. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Neville was caught off guard. He looked at Parvati’s reddening cheeks and reckoned that to be a sign that he had indeed heard what he had thought he heard. “Well, you’ve been really nice and supportive of everyone in PL. Sure, I like you.”

“Well I like you too.”

“Oh.”

The two teens both blushed and looked away. They had managed to put themselves in a corner and neither had any idea on how to get out of it. Did romance have to be so awkward all the time?

Any thoughts of romance flew out of their head when a third-year girl burst into the pub and screamed at the top of her lungs, “Death Eaters!”

Section Break.

Harry grunted as Bess and Tess magically tightened the breastplate that had magically appeared as soon as Harry and Bellatrix decided that they needed to go and personally defend Azkaban with their forces.

Tess knocked on Harry’s chest to see what kind of sound it would make. Instead of the loud bang one would expect from the black lacquered metal that had been magically made weightless, there was just a dull thud.

“Excuse me!” Harry said reproachfully.

“Sorry, mate.” Tess said. “Couldn’t resist.”

Harry looked down at the breastplate and made a silent prayer that it would at least block some spells or prevent him from physical injury. The silver phoenix that had been engraved into the breastplate shimmered strangely. It made him feel protected.

He looked over at Bellatrix who had just gotten her own breastplate on and blushed. It seemed to emphasize her chest quite a bit. As long as it works, he thought silently as Bess came over and draped a dragon-hide cloak over his shoulders.

Bellatrix looked over at him and grinned. “This ought to be fun. Don’t forget to check your wands.”

“Okay.” Harry said. He quickly checked to make sure that his wands were in their appropriate holsters as Bellatrix did likewise. He drew the Black Ash wand from his sleeve as Bellatrix drew one of her Cherry wands.

“Let’s Apparate.” Bellatrix said.

Section break

“What do we do?” Ron asked Hermione desperately as everyone in the Three Broomsticks began to panic. “We’re the only Order members here I think.”

Hermione shrugged. “I have no idea. Let’s find out where the Death Eaters are attacking from I suppose. Then maybe we can send a message to the castle to send some defense.

Ron and Hermione promptly stood up and made their way over to where the girl had been. Much to their surprise they found Neville and Parvati interrogating her as to the Death Eater’s whereabouts. It seemed that he had decided to take charge.

“We’re here, we can take charge now.” Ron announced loudly.

“About how many would you say?” Neville asked the girl, not even bothering to acknowledge Ron’s presence.

“Thirty, maybe.” the girl said, her voice quavering.

Neville nodded thoughtfully and spoke to Parvati. “It only a minor attack then. We can probably take them on.” He then motioned toward a pair of fifth year girls who had rushed in the pub to find him. They were both members of Potter’s Legion. “Where is everyone else?”

“Lavender Brown is having them form a line of defense. The Death Eaters are moving slowly toward the village from around the Shrieking Shack.” explained one quickly.

“Good.” Neville said. “I want you two to go to the castle as fast as you can and tell Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape, and any other teacher that you can find. Be careful on your way, there might be Death Eaters stationed to prevent people from arriving at the castle.

The two girls dashed out the doors and in the general directions of Hogwarts and Ron chose to interject. “I’m the head of the DA and a member of the Order! You can just take charge like that!”

Neville looked at Ron imperiously. “I just did.” He motioned to Parvati, “We need to help Lavender.” The two then left Ron and Hermione standing alone in the pub.

Section break.

Harry and Bellatrix Apparated and found themselves in the midst of Death Eaters running every which way. They were outside the fortress near the dock. Sparing a brief moment, Harry looked out to sea and saw a Ministry boat sailing to the mainland. They knew and they were doing nothing.

“*Triplexio argentum lashio!*” Harry cried, slashing his wand at the nearest group of Death Eaters. Three long and silver slicing whips flew from the tip of the black wand and flailed about ten dark cloaked wizards. They died instantly.

“We have to get into the fortress and help our people.” Bellatrix told Harry over the blast of several explosions as she shot various hexes at random Death Eaters. “There’s strength in numbers.”

The ring abruptly revealed several things about the island to Harry. The Dementors were doing nothing, but if he commanded them directly, they would have no choice but to obey. It also revealed that if he could get to the top of the fortress, he could win the battle easily.

“Let’s go then! Once we get in, we have to get to the roof.” Harry yelled, firing a triple stunner at some Death Eaters headed their way. Bellatrix nodded and the two made use of a back to back fighting move to get to the front doors. They easily opened and they found themselves in a broad hallway filled with Dementors.

Bellatrix’s long pony-tail whipped back and forth as she looked from the Dementors to the Death Eaters outside who were not willing to

follow them into the castle. “Maybe we would be better off getting to the roof from the outside.”

Harry shook his head negatively and then turned and faced the Dementors holding the hand with his signet ring out toward them in a fist. “Repel the attackers!” he yelled. “Don’t let them enter the fortress.”

Dementors began to reluctantly swarm around Harry and Bellatrix as some made their way out into the battle while others stationed themselves at the doors. The main hallway was left clear before them. “This way.” Harry said as he began to sprint toward the other end of the hall.

Section break

“We’re here!” Parvati gasped to Lavender as she and Neville came to an abrupt halt from their run. They had arrived at the end of Hogsmeade with the Shrieking Shack in record time. “What’s happening and where do you have everyone?”

Lavender motioned out toward an empty space of flat land. “About thirty or forty Death Eaters are marching in from that direction. They’re coming in abreast in two lines. We have about twenty Legion members here hiding in various places so we can pick them off at will. I told others to cover other parts of the village.”

“Well done.” Neville said to Lavender who blushed at the praise. “Either this is a trap or these Death Eaters are amateurs. It’s impractical to attack this way.”

Parvati had somehow gotten her hands on a pair of Omnioculars and was squinting through them as she attempted to make out the approaching figures in the dark. “They aren’t acting as if they were bait.” she observed.

“Can everyone hear me?” Neville asked Lavender.

She nodded. “Yes, they’re all within earshot.”

“Good.” Neville said as he formulated his plan. “Hold your fire until they start shooting off spells or they’re on top of you!” he called out. He then found a bush and ducked down behind it, the two girls doing likewise. It would ruin the plan if they were spotted.

Section break

“How many floors are in this bloody castle!” Bellatrix growled when she and Harry reached the top of yet another flight of stairs to find another broad corridor. Unfortunately, each time they gained a level, they had to go to the other end of the corridor to hit the next staircase.

“I just want to know where our people are.” Harry said as he began to run down the corridor.

Bellatrix spotted several stunners coming for him. “Duck!” she yelled.

Harry hit the floor as two stunners flew over his head. He Scryed down the hall and found that a group of Death Eaters happened to be coming down the flight of stairs that he wanted to go up. Apparently Voldemort had been landing Death Eaters on the roof as well as trying to get in at the main entrance. That would make things difficult.

He and Bellatrix quickly shot several stunners down the hall. This proved to be ineffective because the Death Eaters quickly hid themselves farther up the spiral staircase. They would have to take them head on.

“Shields.” Harry said, as he cast a strong reflector shield around his person. It was his favorite because he could control where the spell that hit it rebounded. His wife elected for a shield that grew in strength as it absorbed attacking spells.

They ran down the hallway as quickly as possible and charged up the staircase, taking down multiple Death Eaters both by magic and physical means. When they arrived at the top, they found a narrow hall that led only halfway across the fortress before going up.

“We’re nearly there.” Harry announced.

Section break

“Now!” Neville yelled as loudly as he could, letting off a powerful Reducto at the same time. The other present members of Potter’s Legion quickly followed his lead with the same curse. The line of Death Eaters scattered and Neville began to shoot off stunners and hexes in the confusion and dust.

Section break

Harry and Bellatrix scrambled through the open hatchway and onto the roof of Azkaban and found about ten fiercely fighting Ice soldiers being slowly backed into a corner by twice that number of Death Eaters. More and more Death Eaters were landing on the roof via broomstick by the moment.

Apparently the Death Eaters coming down the staircase had been an advance scouting party. Those not fighting the Ice soldiers were forming into groups that were preparing to go down into the fortress and free the prisoners.

Wasting no time, Harry and Bellatrix began to shoot off spells to scatter those attacking the Ice people. As soon as they were out of the corner, Harry’s soldiers began to fight ten times fiercely than before. His presence strengthened them. “Scatter those groups!” Harry yelled to Bellatrix who promptly took command of the soldiers.

Harry felt drawn to a part of the roof that everyone seemed to be avoiding. Three large and interconnected runes were carved into the stone. Drawing upon knowledge from his studies, Harry was able to recognize them. Dominion, Protection, and Strength.

The runes started to give off a silver light as soon as Harry stepped onto them. He brandished the Black Ash wand and muttered the activation spell that his ring had taught him. “Imperio activacio Polairicis.”

A roar filled Harry's ears as power began to flow from him into the rune and vice-versa. This lasted several minutes. Despite the battle going on around him, Harry felt strangely at peace and detached from everything. Finally, his connection to the runes broke and they began to pulse with their own silver light. In a few minutes, the wards would activate and automatically expel the attackers from the island.

Harry triumphant smile fell when a new, but hauntingly familiar, voice addressed him. "I attack Azkaban and Lord Polairix sends you of all people to defend it. Why does he hide behind you, Potter?"

Lord Voldemort had arrived.

Section break

The dust cleared and Neville could make out three Death Eaters being held under guard by two boys from Ravenclaw. The Death Eaters that they had stunned during the battle had been Portkeyed away by their comrades during the retreat. They had these because they had gotten too close and Neville had Summoned their portkeys away from them.

"Anybody hurt?" Neville asked.

His friends looked around and checked with their friends until that it was established that Potter's Legion had come away unscathed by the battle. "Everyone accounted for." Parvati announced proudly.

"Good." Neville said.

He was about to give more instructions when Ron, Hermione, Snape, and Dumbledore arrived at the scene and found them. "Only two Death Eaters?" Ron exclaimed. "After that scare, I expected more than that. Don't worry Neville, we're here to take care of things."

Parvati, feeling quite insulted on Neville's behalf gasped. "I'll have you know that there were well over thirty Death Eaters here!"

“Appearances can be deceiving during a battle.” Dumbledore said quietly as he examined the prisoners. “It doesn’t matter though. You’ve managed to capture all of the attackers.” This was followed up with a smirk by Ron.

Neville contented himself to glare at Ron and Dumbledore, but Parvati was about to make more noise. When Snape shook his head at her, she closed her mouth. They could wait for that later. They should at least say what Snape had to say.

“We’ll just get back to the castle then.” Neville said. “Is it all right if we check on our friends on our way back?”

“Go ahead.” Snape said.

Section break

Harry turned around to face Voldemort as did everyone else. The battle with the Death Eaters had stalled to watch the confrontation. Bellatrix tried to give Harry an encouraging smile, but it was more of a grimace.

“Hello, Tom.” Harry said as coolly as possibly. He knew that it would make Voldemort mad. If they could get into a discussion, then the wards would have enough time to activate.

“My name is Lord Voldemort.” the Dark lord said menacingly. “You would do well to remember that. Now tell me, Potter. Why has the Lord of Polairix sent you?”

The realization that Voldemort didn’t know that he was the Lord of Polairix made Harry want to laugh. He still had a wild card up his sleeve for future battles, assuming that he survived this one. Harry elected to make Voldemort angry. “Because everyone knows that you’re afraid of me.”

“You will pay for that!” Voldemort yelled. He raised his wand but was distracted when a silver dome began to flicker overhead.

Harry rejoiced. The wards were going into effect. Suddenly, light flared from the Runes behind him. He turned quickly to see what it was. They were now shining like the sun. Harry could feel that power coursing from them into the walls and wards of the castle. He could see the Dementors being bound to the powers.

He was drawn from his reverie when he heard his wife shriek his name. He cursed himself. Idiot! So much for constant vigilance. He would go down in history as the Boy-Who-Wasn't-Very-Vigilant. Maybe future generations would learn that all important lesson.

Time seemed to slow down as he instinctively turned and reached for the Ivory wand secured in his left boot. He drew it as he finished his turn and brought it to level. The green light of the Killing Curse was rushing toward him.

With his mind too numb to think rationally, Harry muttered the first spell he had ever learned, not forgetting the correct pronunciation as he looked at the green light intensely. "Wingardium Leviosa."

There was an explosion and Harry dropped the Ivory wand as it seemingly caught on fire and burned him. Phoenix song seemed to erupt around him as he heard a woman scream his name and sob at the same time. Was it his mom or Bellatrix? He didn't know and forgot the question as his senses were flooded with a flying sensation which lasted until blackness consumed his mind.

Chapter 15

Bellatrix watched with growing horror as the deadly green light so commonly associated with the Killing Curse exploded from the end of Voldemort's wand. She instinctively looked toward her husband and found that he was distracted and then screamed desperately. "HARRY!"

Time slowed as he turned and drew his other wand. Her ears didn't seem to be working anymore as she watched Harry mouth some sort of spell in self defense. The green light pulsed and then exploded violently and her heart seemed to stop beating as she watched Harry being lifted from the ground by the shockwave.

The next thing she heard was herself crying out his name through tears which had began to flow as he flew. Another second, and he landed on the other side of the roof with a sickening crunch. Everyone stared at Lord Polairix with shock covering their faces.

Pandemonium then broke out among the Death Eaters when three bolts of lightning simultaneously struck the three runes. Another explosion followed and Bellatrix and the Ice soldiers watched as Lord Voldemort and his Death Eaters were hurled in the water. After that, they disappeared. Bellatrix vaguely assumed that Voldemort and his followers had been carrying Portkeys.

After several more lightning flashes and thunderclaps which were followed by intensified rain, everyone shook off their confusion. Nailoff checked all his men while Bellatrix ran to Harry and fell on her knees next to him.

Not willing to believe that she could be a widow, Bellatrix spoke in a quavering voice. "Harry?"

Both to her amazement and extreme concern, Harry began to cough up small amounts of blood. After the coughs died, he opened his eyes and looked at her with a slightly blank look. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Harry looked at her a moment before responding in a slurred voice. "Just tired."

"Sleep then." Bellatrix instructed quietly. "But promise not to leave me."

"I won't." Harry whispered before falling unconscious.

Nailoff soon joined Bellatrix after attending to some of his men which had been injured during the fight. "Is he okay?"

Bellatrix did her best to gather her wits and then stood up. "I'm not sure. We must get him immediate medical care."

The captain looked at Harry and nodded. "I'll have some of my men move him back to Nair'icaix. I'll go to Savvire and get a doctor. I believe that I know of the perfect person to help. Is there anything else?"

"See to it that Azkaban is safe when you have the time."

"Of course." Nailoff said agreeably.

Bellatrix stepped away to find Harry's wands as he motioned one of his men over and began to give instructions. She quickly found them lying on the roof near the runes and then pocketed them after studying the ivory one with wonder. It was a miracle that it had not been destroyed.

She joined four Ice soldiers who had conjured a stretcher and placed Harry on it. One of them held out his hand and she took it. One of them activated a Portkey and a jerk later, she found herself in the master suite where they gingerly transferred Harry to the bed. They all saluted and then Apparated away.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the door opened to admit Bess, Tess, and an old man who introduced himself as Dr. Burgix. "Came as soon as I heard, milady! There's not a thing to worry about, I'll set him right."

He quickly made his way over to Harry while Bess and Tess stared with horror at their fallen lord. "What happened?" Tess asked, sounding near the verge of tears herself.

Bellatrix quickly explained everything that had transpired. Burgix listened to the whole account and even asked some questions of his own as he examined Harry carefully. After the account ended, they all watched silently as Burgix worked.

He finally finished the cursory examination and announced his findings which relieved the three women greatly. "He's not as bad off as he looks. Basically, his landing after being thrown bruised him up a bit, thus the blood. His slurred voice comes from a minor concussion that he received, and his weakness comes from magical exhaustion."

"So he'll be okay? No lasting damage?" Bellatrix asked anxiously.

"Absolutely!" Burgix replied as he pulled a small vial of potion from the folds of his cloak. "This will speed up the healing process. After plenty of sleep, a hot bath or two to loosen him up, and plenty of food, he'll be right as rainwater." He then administered the potion to Harry, which took some skill.

"Thank you, doctor." Bellatrix said, relief plain in her voice.

Doctor Burgix nodded graciously and exited the room. At Bellatrix's request, Bess and Tess assisted her in removing Harry's armor, robes, and then helped tuck him into bed. They then helped remove her armor.

"That will be all." Bellatrix said tiredly.

"Let us know when he wakes up." Tess said, as she and her sister left the room.

Bellatrix nodded and after a very short shower in the bathroom, joined Harry in bed after the lights automatically dimmed. Instead of falling

asleep immediately, she turned on her side and studied her unconscious husband.

Tired, and not necessarily thinking rationally, she spoke. "I always dreamed of marrying a prince." He didn't answer, but that was okay. She didn't expect him to. "My mum thought it was a grand idea. So long as he was pureblood."

She sighed bitterly. "My mum wasn't a very nice woman. I guess I followed in her footsteps. I hope that I've improved though. After tonight, I now sympathize with those who have suffered because of Avada Kedavra. Especially the ones that came from my wand. I'll never use that curse again, so long as I live. Unless it would save your life."

Bellatrix then rambled on, touching various subjects until she was too tired to keep talking. Harry had not heard a single word, but she felt closer to him than she had ever been. "Don't leave me." she whispered, as she rolled back onto her back and drifted asleep.

The first thing Harry did when he regained consciousness was to groan. He now knew how the Tin Man felt. It was a shame that there was no such thing as oil for stiff joints. Without opening his eyes, he contemplated going back to sleep and facing the discomfort later.

Just as he was about to sink into the dark abyss, he heard Bellatrix began to moan something under her breath. It sounded as if she was trying to say 'No.' Curiosity aroused, Harry opened his eyes and turned his head. She was laying on her stomach, hugging her pillow for dear life.

He raised his eyebrows. Normally, she slept a bit more passively. Not wanting to disturb her, he turned his attention to the ceiling as she began to suck air into her lungs with great gasps. Maybe she was having a nightmare. Should he wake her up?

I would want someone to wake me up, Harry thought to himself. His waking her up was prevented however when she abruptly let out a heart wrenching howl and woke up herself. She pushed herself up and looked at Harry with wild violet eyes.

“Nightmare?” Harry asked.

The violet eyes came slightly more into focus and she nodded as she studied him as if reassuring herself that he was indeed there. “Do you feel all right?” she asked slowly.

“Just a little stiff.”

“Better than dead.” she countered.

Taking Harry by surprise, the wild look returned to her eyes and she threw herself onto him and began to cry her eyes out. Not sure what to do, he brought up one of his hands and stroked her back through the oversize Muggle t-shirt she customarily wore to bed.

After about ten minutes, she regained her composure, and after an additional half hour of enjoying each other’s closeness, she was ready to speak. “The doctor advised a hot bath to help loosen yourself up.”

“No objections to that.” Harry said.

“I think that I’ll even join you.” Bellatrix said as she climbed out of bed and then helped Harry to his feet, making sure that his stiff joints didn’t impede his ability to walk.

They then made their way to the bathroom where they found the overlarge tub, which Harry had previously compared to a Muggle hot-tub, filled with variously colored bubbles and water. Harry removed his undergarments and lowered himself in. Bellatrix flirtatiously removed her t-shirt and slowly lowered herself in opposite Harry.

“So, how long has it been since I got knocked cold?” he asked as he luxuriated in the hot and soothing water.

“Less than a night.” Bellatrix answered as she made use of a bar of soap and then some shampoo and scented oils.

"Wow. I'm usually out for days." Harry joked. "First time I faced down Voldemort, I was out for so long that I missed a Quidditch match."

Bellatrix laughed. "You didn't miss anything that important."

They idly sat for a few moments until Bellatrix asked a random question. "Are you ever disturbed by the fact that I'm more than twice your age?"

Harry shrugged. "No. Not really." He didn't relish the thought of explaining that to his friends though. "Why?"

She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Oh."

The Order had convened again, due to the attack that had occurred at Hogsmeade. Ron was reporting to everyone his great heroics in the situation and was making many proposals as to what should be done with the prisoners. If he had been paying attention, he would have noticed that they had been handed over to the Ministry.

However, Hermione was remaining silent as she thought about the actions she had seen Neville and his friends take. She was willing to bet anything that another Defense group existed and that Neville was the leader.

This led Hermione to wonder how it was that they had all turned to him and to what purpose. It was not likely that his group was a clone of the DA, else it would not have taken off without the DA having a chance to show some sort of competition for student attendance.

The attention of the whole group was arrested when Snape arrived and contributed some of his own information. "Shortly after the Ministry Aurors left Azkaban last night, Voldemort attacked the island in force."

“Meaning that the Hogsmeade attack was a diversion.” Dumbledore concluded.

Snape nodded. “Yes, that was the plan. The Dark Lord did not expect Lord Polairix to take possession of the island so soon however. They got in a fight with Polairix’s forces for the island.”

“Who won?” Hermione asked.

“Polairix did.” Snape said cautiously. He had not received a letter from Harry since the event, so he treaded carefully. He would only tell what Voldemort knew. “Shortly after the attack began, Lord and Lady Polairix arrived at the island in time to see the ferry with Ministry Aurors abandon them to the attack. Some sort of battle ensued and Lord Polairix and the Dark Lord faced off. It ended in a draw in which ancient wards were activated and You-Know-Who was forced to leave the island.”

“That’s disturbing.” Dumbledore surmised. “The Ministry didn’t necessarily have an obligation to assist Lord Polairix, but he doesn’t have an obligation to help us fight Voldemort either. He’s probably angry about that.”

“I wouldn’t know.” Snape said, truthfully.

“There’s a Lady Polairix?” Mrs. Weasley asked sharply.

Snape grimaced. Lord Voldemort had not necessarily drawn that conclusion about the woman at Potter’s side, but from prior knowledge, he knew it to be truth. “That’s what the Dark Lord would assume.” Snape said. Fortunately there weren’t any other spies among the Death Eater ranks to prove him wrong.

“That is very interesting.” murmured Dumbledore.

The meeting soon concluded and Snape made his way to his own office to a private meeting with the Longbottom boy. He had hoped to have received some sort of instruction from Harry as to what actions should be taken on his end, but none had come.

When he arrived in his dungeon office, he found not only Neville, but two girls from Gryffindor at his side. The girls looked particularly displeased. Neville only looked passively ruffled.

“Why is it that the Order and Ronald are getting all the credit for fighting off those Death Eaters?” Parvati demanded. “It’s like we weren’t even there!”

Snape held up his hands placatingly. “There’s nothing that I could do. Right now you’ll just have to take it and be quiet unless you want to leave Potter’s Legion open to public knowledge. I haven’t heard from Harry yet.”

“Why not? Doesn’t he know?” Lavender asked.

“Potter had his own battle to fight at the same time.” Snape then related everything he knew about the battle. It was a lot more than he had told to the Order. “I assume that Potter is probably unconscious or worse.”

“I hope he’s okay.” Neville said, concern etched on his face.

Snape shrugged. “For now, just act like nothing happened. I’ll tell you the instant I hear any news.”

“We can do that.” Parvati said.

For the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon, Harry elected to remain in bed and read an advanced text from his library. This appeased both Bellatrix and his personal assistants who continually looked at him as if he was a delicate ornament on the verge of shattering.

He looked up when the door to the bedroom opened to admit Bess and Bellatrix who quickly shut it behind them. His wife immediately began to cast various cleaning charms to make the room look even more spotless than before.

Bess approached him somewhat nervously. "My lord?"

Harry looked at her curiously. "Yes?"

"It's hard to explain, my lord." Bess began slowly as Bellatrix finished cleaning the room and then commenced to attend to Harry, fluffing his pillow, straightening the bed covers, and combing his hair.

"Give it a shot."

"There's a young widow of the Ice People here to see you." Bess explained. "She has brought her infant son for you to bless."

"I'm not sure that I understand." Harry said in a confused tone as he slid a bookmark between the pages of his tome and set it down.

Bess sighed. "The father took ill and died before the child was born. Although she and her child will be well cared for, children without fathers are rather disadvantaged among the Ice people. In ancient times, it was considered extreme good luck to have a baby blessed by a powerful or noble wizard. She hopes that if you bless him, he'll have good luck in his life."

"Am I really regarded as a powerful or noble wizard?" Harry asked dryly.

"Both, actually."

Harry sighed heavily. If he had been able to stay at Hogwarts, he was pretty sure that no one would have asked him to bless their baby. He also feared unwanted attention. "What happens when word gets out that I 'bless' babies?"

"My people hold you in the deepest respect." Bess said reassuringly. "They would only impose on you in extreme situations like this one."

"All right. I'll do it, but I don't know that it will do any good."

Bellatrix smiled mysteriously. "I've heard about this custom. You will likely be very surprised. This woman had obviously done a great deal of research if she came across this custom."

Bess quickly made her way back to the door, opened it, and motioned for someone to come in. A young Ice woman with silver-brown hair scurried in carrying a small bundle. Harry assumed that it was her son.

The woman quickly made her way to the bed, bowing every third step before coming to a stop on her knees next to the bed. She held out the baby which was wrapped in a blanket to Harry, surprising him by looking into his eyes with a desperate countenance.

"I would be forever indebted to you if you would give my son your blessing." she said in a nervous voice.

"It's no problem." Harry said, trying to put her at ease. He then gingerly took the proffered babe and awkwardly held it.

As Harry studied the baby's serene face, he felt a strange feeling wash over him. Feeling compelled to do so, he took his one hand and touched it to the child's left temple and spoke. "Denix son of Lenea, I give unto you my blessing."

As soon as he finished speaking those words, his eyesight blanked out and was replaced with a vision that he did not understand. His normal vision returned, and although he was still confused, he spoke again. "The day will come when you shall lead my armies and see the rise and fall of those who aspire to Darkness. Though you will often be in peril, you will live to old age."

Once he was finished speaking, the strange feeling left Harry and he smiled and made a face at the baby, causing him to laugh.

"Thank you, my lord!" Lenea the mother said, over and over. "You have given me more than I could ever hope for. I am eternally in your debt."

Harry shrugged, gave the baby a quick smile, and handed it back. He looked up at Bellatrix, who seemed to be contemplating something deeply as she looked at the child. "Did you know that would happen?"

"Something like that." Bellatrix responded vaguely.

Lenea stood and bowed to Harry, before leaving the room with Bess. Harry gave a satisfied smile. "That wasn't too hard."

Chapter Sixteen

"Did Snape explain why he wanted to meet with us?" Lavender asked as she, Neville, and Parvati casually made their way down to Snape's office in the dungeons. Most of the students had retired to their common rooms or bed. If anyone asked where they were going after curfew, they could always claim some sort of detention.

Neville shook his head. "No. He just told me to meet him and to bring a couple of others. I hate being in the dark about things, but sometimes it is the best way to go."

They arrived at his door, looked up and down the hall to see if anyone had noticed them, and then knocked quietly. The door opened to reveal Professor Snape who motioned them quickly. He too made sure that no one had seen and then closed the door and began to pace.

"I finally received word from Potter." Snape announced quietly. "During the battle he was indeed injured, but has made a full recovery. I replied and told about our side of the battle. He wrote back and would like you all to visit as soon as possible."

"When do we visit?" Neville asked calmly.

Snape stopped pacing and looked him in the eye. "Tonight. It's nothing serious, but the sooner the better. I would come with you, but You-Know-Who has called a surprise meeting. Before you go, there's some things you should know, and discuss with Potter."

"Which are?" Parvati said.

"The Order has put Weasley and Granger in charge of investigating this secret Defense club that seems to have sprouted up. I'm supposed to supervise and help them." Snape said, finally sitting down at his desk. "You'll have to ask Potter how that should be handled."

“We’ll do that.” Neville said. “How do we get there?”

A foot-long stick was produced from a desk drawer. “This should do the trick. The activation word is ‘Polairix.’”

The three students grasped it at the same time and Neville spoke the word. “Polairix.” The customary pulling sensation was felt by all, and they were soon standing in a comfortable office. They turned around and found Harry sitting at a slightly cluttered desk looking at them.

“Welcome to my humble home.” Harry said with a smile on his face. He stood up and gave all their hands a shake as they approached the desk and took a chair in turn. “I expected Snape to come with you. Is anything wrong?”

“No,” Neville replied, “he just had an unexpected engagement pop up.”

Harry noted with amusement that Lavender and Parvati were ogling the elegant decor of the room. Personally, he thought the built in shelves loaded with books were a good effect. They were concentrating on the woodwork though. “I take it you like my new house.”

The two girls gave him an abashed look. “It’s wonderful. How did you find your way here?” Lavender said.

A full explanation of the events after the incident on Privet Drive soon followed. He tried to go through it as quickly as possible, not wanting to be the victim of the two girls’ sympathy when he told about Azkaban and being mistreated. “So, here I am.” he concluded. “I hear that you had your own battle. Why don’t you tell me about that?”

Parvati then launched into a long narrative about Hogsmeade and how Neville managed to fight off the thirty Death Eaters. She also emphasized how the Order and Ron Weasley had mistreated them all after the battle. “Those who did the work should get the credit!” she said violently when she finished.

"If you worry about who gets the credit, the job won't get done." Harry sighed. "Unfortunately, who gets the credit for taking down Voldemort and other important things will affect the wizarding world's political system for the future."

"So what do we do?" Neville asked.

"Try to avoid notice for now." Harry said carefully. "Lend a hand when possible, but if the Order can handle these things, save yourself for another battle."

Suddenly, Neville remembered what Snape had told them before they departed. "The Order knows that a Defense group exists separate from DA. Ron and Hermione are supposed to track us down with the help of Professor Snape. He wants to know what he should do, and I'd like to know what PL should do."

"I suppose they've noticed that large groups of students disappear all at the same time." Harry mused. "It won't be long before Hermione puts two and two together and realizes who was taking the lead at Hogsmeade."

"I had not thought of that." Lavender observed.

Harry nodded slowly. "Avoid notice for now, but don't tell lies or do massive cover-ups. If you're discovered, try to keep them from realizing your connection to me. Tell Snape to not aid, but not hinder the investigation. At this point in time, his position in the Order and Voldemort's forces is more valuable than the secrecy of PL."

"What if the worse happens and PL and its connection to you is discovered? We could get into a lot of trouble, even expelled or put on trial, for being connected to a convict like you- nothing personal of course." Parvati inquired somewhat anxiously.

A grim smile spread across Harry's face. "I have a certain influence over the school. Whatever you do, don't leave the Hogwarts grounds. Flee into the Forbidden Forest if necessary. If there's any sign of

serious trouble, send me an owl. Don't approach Snape. I'll come and deal with the situation personally."

"I'll remember that." Neville said carefully, not quite understanding what Harry was getting at. He trusted him to know what he was doing though.

A short silence followed as the teens all sat and pondered. Parvati's curiosity about the marriage of Harry and Bellatrix as explained by Harry earlier, overcame her. "So, how's married life treating you?"

Harry smiled at her. "It's wonderful. Bellatrix would be here to greet you, but she seems to have shut herself in the library of late. Some sort of research project." He then darted a glance to Neville. "Look, Neville . . . I realize the whole thing is awkward- what with your parents and all."

"Don't worry about it." Neville said reassuringly. "I know that she helped to . . . hurt my parents a lot, but from what you've told me, she seems to have tried to make up for her past actions. I'll admit that any interaction with her would be uncomfortable for me, but I'm sure that we can resolve it. I hold nothing against you for loving her."

"If you need to talk about anything, come to me anytime. By the way, how are your parents doing?" Harry said.

Neville shrugged. "The same."

"I hope that's a good thing." Harry said solemnly, not knowing that elsewhere, the Longbottom's health was being discussed.

"I think that it would be safe to assume that Harry Potter is dead, my lord." Wormtail said, desperately trying to cheer up Lord Voldemort, who tended to torture people when he was in unhappy moods.

Voldemort looked at Wormtail until he looked away, unable to bear the gaze of the red eyes. "He's survived me too many times to make such a broad assumption." Voldemort hissed. "Until I see his dead body decompose, I will consider him a threat."

“Why if they buried him?”

“Then we’ll reopen the grave and burn the body!” Voldemort declared. “However, that is not my main concern as of yet. Rumors of a disturbing nature have reached my ears. They must take first priority.”

Wormtail shuddered. New projects were never good. “What about Lord Polairix?”

“He seems to be minding his own business.” Voldemort replied, almost civilly.

“What are these rumors that you’ve heard?” Pettigrew said, resigned to the fact that there was no getting around it.

Voldemort’s eyes seemed to glaze over as he thought out loud for the benefit of his closest, though not most competent, servant. “The Longbottoms were spectacular Aurors, especially considering their young age. Unfortunately, they also had a side hobby. Spell-crafting.”

“I see.” Wormtail said, not really seeing, but reckoning that he might as well say it.

“Combining those two things can produce disastrous results.” Voldemort stated as a matter-of-fact. “It is said that before their hospitalization, they were crafting a spell designed to utterly destroy me. They were in the last stages of making calculations when I went to the Potters. They only needed one powerful enough to perform the spell.”

Wormtail sighed. This was likely to be a dead end sort of project, with lots of pain for those who encountered the dead end first, unless Voldemort hit the dead end himself. Everyone would suffer then. “The Longbottoms will likely never recover! There’s not point in worrying about it.”

“The things that I have not bothered to worry about are the things that have caused me the most trouble.” Voldemort growled. “Lord Polairix is powerful and an unknown factor to boot. He could heal them. I’m going to take care of this one before it comes back to hurt me.”

“Your plan?”

Voldemort’s red eyes flared. “We’ll put the Longbottoms out of their misery.”

Bellatrix carefully replaced the lid to a bottle of ink and finished cleaning up for the day. She now had two tables filled with notes and various books from the library of Nair’icaix. There were plenty of sources that led her to a great deal of useful information, however-none of the knowledge she had dug up had provided the answer that she was searching for.

I’ll get it eventually, Bellatrix resolved to herself quietly as she unconsciously dimmed the lights and made her way out into the hall. She then quickly made her way up to her bedroom and found dinner laid out. Harry was nowhere in sight however.

She quickly ate all the food and then went in search of Harry. Within a few minutes, she came across Tess. “Do you know where my husband is?” Bellatrix asked.

“I believe he went down to the beach.” Tess replied. “Is there anything else?”

“No, but thank you.” Bellatrix said absently as she wondered what Harry would find so attractive about the beach.

A few moments later, she had a cloak and was walking toward the double doors in the main entrance hall. They opened for her automatically and she strode through and onto the long bridge that led to the other island. She found Harry laying in a beach chair and watching the sunset on the same beach that they had been washed up on.

“Isn’t it a little cold for a trip to the beach?” Bellatrix asked, drawing her cloak around her tightly as she observed Harry in his sunglasses, shorts, and tropical shirt. He even had some sort of drink.

Harry grinned. “Warming charm.”

“Oh.”

“Join me, and we can both enjoy the simple pleasures of owning one’s own beach.” Harry said as he conjured another beach chair for his wife.

Bellatrix looked skeptically around at the hard and rocky beach. It was not very ideal for sunbathing, beach volleyball, or sand castles. “It’s not much of a beach.” she observed as she sat down in the chair Harry had conjured.

“Only one I’ve ever seen.” Harry said as he finished his punch with a big swig. The glass he had been drinking it out of disappeared.

“I didn’t know that.” Bellatrix said meekly.

Harry shrugged absently as he settled down. “It’s okay. I take it that you’ve been to a few beaches in your lifetime.”

“My father would often take us to various places over the summer vacations.” Bellatrix said. “We visited the French Riviera a few times. It was a prime meeting place for wizards of the shadier sort. What sorts of vacations did you go on?”

“The Dursley’s didn’t take me on vacations. If they went somewhere, I had the pleasure of visiting an elderly neighbor of mine. When I turned eleven, Hogwarts seemed to be the perfect vacation for me.”

“That’s horrible!” Bellatrix exclaimed.

“That’s just life.” Harry said in a mellow voice.

Bellatrix was now fuming. How dare anybody treat Harry Potter in such a manner! Or any other child for that matter. With these thoughts an idea arose. However, Bellatrix shoved it aside temporarily because their conversation had reminded her of another issue that she had wanted to bring up.

“Harry? I’ve been thinking.” Bellatrix began.

“About what?”

She looked at him lying down in the beach chair so peacefully. How would he take it? Surprise? Shock? There was only one way to find out. “Children. I would like us to become parents.”

Harry stared at her with a certain amount of surprise. He had not ever really considered having children at the age of sixteen. Come to think of it, he had never really planned on marrying someone twice his age. “Have children? As in . . .”

Bellatrix read his mind. “Getting me pregnant.” she finished.

“Is it safe? What if Voldemort finds out about any children we have. They could be in danger.” Harry thought out loud.

“If we put our lives on hold for his benefit, then he’s won.” Bellatrix said. “Besides, I highly doubt that Voldemort will ever be able to force his way into our fortress back there.” She then gave him an extremely pleading look. “You would be the perfect father. Narcissa is proof of that.”

“In what way?”

Bellatrix thought carefully before answering. “Your actions have appropriately punished her and she will learn her lesson. That’s a good parenting skill.”

“It will be a long time before any children we have are that old.” Harry observed.

“What about that baby you gave a blessing to? You looked like a natural when holding it.”

Harry shook his head. “Dumb luck. I have no idea on how to take care of a baby.”

“We can learn together then.” Bellatrix pleaded.

Not being really opposed to having a child, and not wanting to hear his wife reduced to begging, Harry made his decision. “All right. Let’s have a baby.”

Chapter Seventeen

"Would anyone care to make an attempt at the Rebeamio Shield?" asked Professor Tura, the teacher who had taken up the Defense Against the Dark Arts post. Too put it simply: she was young, beautiful, and extremely friendly. Nearly every boy in the class was smitten.

Ron promptly raised his hand. Since Harry was gone, he often prided himself as the top in the Defense class. Well, in the practical section anyway. Hermione always took the lead when theory was concerned.

"Mr. Weasley, come on up." Tura said with a calculating smile. "I'll cast a simple hex at you and then you can perform the spell to defend against it."

"All right." Ron said, as he stood up and made his way to the front. He drew his wand and held it out in front as him as he turned to face Professor Tura who had done the same. "Ready when you are." he said, mustering quite a bit of confidence.

Without any advance notice, Tura drew her wand and shot a Slasher hex at Ron. With milliseconds to spare, he yelled "Rebeamiox!" The hex crashed into the shield and was rebounded toward the professor who used a simple but powerful shield to absorb it.

"Very good Mr. Weasley. Now, Mr. Longbottom. Let's see you take a try at it." Tura said with a smile.

Neville nodded and approached the front of the class as Ron returned to his seat. This time Tura had her wand already in her hand and was slower to attack Neville. When she thought his attention might have wandered, she shot off a quick Leg-Locking hex. It was 'Rebeamioxed' with ease.

"That's nothing!" Ron called out in disgust. "You deliberately went easy on him!" Over the past several weeks the Defense professor had been showing unusual favoritism toward Neville just like Snape

favored Malfoy. She wasn't even a former Gryffindor. Tura had hailed from Slytherin.

Tura was grinning madly. "Did I?" she cooed.

"Yes!"

"All right then. Why don't you demonstrate a proper spell and see if his shield will hold." she said softly.

Despite Hermione's protests, Ron angrily stood up and made his way to the front of the classroom, glaring at Neville all the time. Professor Tura stepped back and took a seat behind her desk at the head of the classroom. "Mr. Weasley will be allowed to use one spell of his choosing to attempt to overcome Mr. Longbottom's shield. Nothing lethal or illegal is to be used." She then turned her head to Neville and winked at him, her gesture hidden from Ron by her long blonde hair. "Rebeamiox acceleratus." she mouthed to him.

Neville nodded confidently to acknowledge the new spell and then looked over to Ron who had decided not to waste any time. Neville held up his wand and muttered "Rebeamiox acceleratus." as Ron shouted a very powerful hex.

The hex flew across the room, propelled by Ron's smirk. However, it hit Neville's shield and rebounded much faster than it would have using the normal shield. Ron was hit by his own hex before he even knew that it had rebounded. Froth began to stream from his mouth as he hacked uncontrollably.

Professor Tura stood up and motioned for Neville to take a seat. "Thank you Mr. Longbottom." She then pulled her wand and performed the counter-curse which promptly solved Ron's most immediate problem.

"Today, our lesson was not necessarily about shield charms." she said as she gestured for Ron to resume his seat. Ron did so, shooting Neville a lethal glare. "Not only do you need to approach a fight with speed, skill, and accuracy, but you must be in the

appropriate mind-set. Would anyone care to venture a guess as to what mind-set that should or should not be?"

"Obviously anger and arrogance are bad attitudes to start off a duel with." Parvati quickly said in response to the query.

Tura nodded in agreement. "Precisely. Take ten for Gryffindor. Anger and arrogance may advance someone to a certain level. Voldemort is a prime example of this. He is a very arrogant man and most everything he does is out of anger, whether it be hot or cold."

"He's invincible isn't he?" asked a fearful Hufflepuff.

There was an abrupt stillness in the room as everyone looked at each other. No one had ever come right out and said that, but it had always been a present thought. Harry Potter might have had a chance, but it seemed that he was gone.

The Professor placed her hands on the desk and leaned forward, giving the whole class an intense stare. "Make no mistake. Voldemort. Will. Fall." She then looked directly at Ron. "See to it that you don't allow your own arrogance to lead to your fall."

Silence reigned as Tura stood silent for effect. No one dared to say anything as she continued to look at them. Finally, relief came with the bell that signified the end of class. "There will be an essay on arrogance and the fall of a Dark lord of your choice due next time." Tura called out. "Longbottom, would you please remain behind for a moment?"

Neville kindly did so, telling Parvati and Lavender that he would catch them up as soon as he was finished. He then approached Tura who was sitting at her desk still. "Was there anything you needed, Professor?"

The Defense professor locked her impassive blue eyes on his own for a short time, seemingly staring deep into his soul and reading his thoughts and feelings. Finally she answered. "Call me Crystal."

"All right, Crystal." Neville said boldly. "Was there anything I could help you with?"

"Yes, there was actually." she replied in kind. "I'm aware of the existence of your little Defense group." she said, smirking at the attempt Neville made to hide his shock. "I've observed since the return of Voldemort that both the Ministry and Professor Dumbledore's little group seem to be acting inefficiently. I would like to join your group."

Neville looked at her shrewdly. Was it possible that she was acting independently? Or was this a clever trap set up by Dumbledore and the Order? After thinking quickly, Neville decided that Snape would have forewarned him. However, it wouldn't do to throw caution to the wind. "What makes you think there is such a group and what makes you think such a group would be any better than what adults could do?"

"I don't think there is such a group, Neville. I 'know.'"

"How is that?"

A faint blush tinged her cheeks. "I have certain . . . skills that allow me to gather intelligence quite easily. Deception and secrets rarely escape my notice."

Such skills could be useful, Neville reckoned. He still wasn't convinced however. "You didn't tell me why you thought such a group would be better than the Ministry or Dumbledore."

" I know what happened to Harry Potter." Crystal said contemptuously. "He was imprisoned and is now on the loose. For some reason, I can't help but feel that he wouldn't run away from Voldemort or all of his classmates. I suspect that he and his power is behind your Defense group."

It was a good explanation, Neville admitted to himself. There was still one matter to clear up however. "If such a group were to exist, they

would only be learning Defense skills. You're a Defense teacher. What's the point of joining?"

"Do you really undervalue your talent and power that much?" Tura asked. "Even if there is nothing for me to learn, I could help teach. I can also serve as a connection to the Hogwarts staff. It can be helpful to have a friendly person of legal age."

"I'll think about it." Neville sighed. "Let me get back to you.

"All right."

"That witch!" Ron exclaimed angrily for perhaps the tenth time that night. He turned to Hermione who was eagerly writing an essay for her Arithmancy class. "Did you see how she favored Neville? He always gets the points for Gryffindor, she always takes things easy on him!"

Hermione shrugged. "What about teamwork for the House? Neville is a part of Gryffindor too, you know."

"I know!" Ron barked. "But that doesn't change the fact that she's clearly favoring him over me. I should be the best Defense Against the Dark Arts student now that Harry is off raiding Muggle towns or doing whatever an escaped convict does."

"Maybe he is better than you."

"Not you too!" Ron nearly shouted in exasperation.

"Who too?" asked Ginny as she approached Ron and Hermione. She had just returned from a quick trip to the library for some homework on Potions.

Hermione sighed. "Ron is angry because Professor Tura seems to be favoring Neville."

"That's hardly fair." frowned Ginny.

"I don't know." Hermione muttered, burying herself in her essay. Her doubts about the whole situation with Ron and the war of Voldemort were surfacing again. No matter how she looked at it, she could feel nothing but guilt. "I really don't know."

Ginny decided not to press Hermione in her uncomfortable state. Instead, she changed the subject. "Weren't you two supposed to be working to investigate the existence of this Defense group that you seem to think exists?"

"I say that we confront Neville about it right now!" Ron declared, quickly switching gears.

"Maybe we should talk to Professor Snape first." Hermione suggested. "He is supposed to be helping us with this whole investigation."

Ron snorted. "Like he really cares about this whole thing. Besides, we don't have to tell Neville that we're onto him. I can be really subtle." He stood up and walked across the Common Room to where he spotted Neville working on a Herbology project. Hermione and Ginny followed but kept their distance. They didn't want to be involved.

"Hey, Ron! How are you doing." Neville said cheerfully as he prodded a potted plant with his wand.

"Yeah, hi. How's your Defense coming along?"

Neville smiled. "I've improved a lot. Especially since Harry gave us all a boost in DA."

"Practicing much?"

"Well, for homework and stuff like that. Professor Tura does require us to make sure our spells get mastered after all." Neville replied.

Ron narrowed his eyes. He wasn't going to get out of this that easily. "You seem busy of late. Not around much now that I think about it."

“If you say so.”

“Why don’t you come to DA anymore?”

Neville couldn’t help but get a little cheeky at this point. “Well, Harry hasn’t called any meetings lately.”

A growl escaped Ron’s thinned lips as he looked at Neville. “Harry is gone. I’m in charge now.”

“Funny,” Neville said in a voice that brooked no opposition, “I don’t remember voting you in.”

James is a very good name, Bellatrix thought idly as she laid on her back and stared at the dark ceiling. It was quite late, but she was too excited to sleep. James Harry Potter. No. Maybe James Harold Potter. Or maybe just a plain H for the middle name that didn’t represent anything.

Then again, it could always end up being a girl. They would name that one Lily of course, after his mother. The middle name could be Isabella or Belle. Bellatrix wasn’t so sure about naming a child directly after herself though.

She sighed as she turned over onto her side and looked over at Harry’s sleeping form. Unfortunately he had not gotten around to getting her pregnant yet, so going over names was a bit premature. “All in good time,” she whispered, smiling happily.

Having nothing better to do, she rolled onto her stomach and waited to fall asleep. Three hundred and forty-seven sheep later, Bellatrix was still wide awake. She turned her head and looked at Harry again. “It’s not fair!” she muttered to him. “You could sleep through an earthquake while I can’t even get to sleep in the first place!”

No response. Had she expected one? Not really. Deciding that since Harry could sleep through anything, and that she wasn’t going to go to sleep, Bellatrix fumbled for her wand on the bedside stand. “Lumos.” She then placed the wand in a specially designed holder so that she could read without having to hold it.

A book about countering Dark spells was soon produced from a nearby bookshelf. That lasted for ten whole minutes before it was returned to its resting place. A book about pregnancy and child care was furtively brought out from under the bed.

Bellatrix propped herself up against the headboard and peacefully read until Harry suddenly let out a loud gasp and then drew his breath in sharply. She slammed the book shut and looked at him with wide eyes.

Upon discovery that he was still asleep, she let out a breath that she had not realized she was holding. She wanted to wait for a little while before shoving baby literature on him. It was true that he was quite young. He needed time to get used to the idea. If he discovered her reading it now, he would feel obligated to join her despite his discomfort. Then he would be more uncomfortable.

It was amazing that he was not totally against the idea. Any child of his would be in danger, especially if Voldemort wanted to attack him. However, she had considered this carefully before even proposing the idea to him. Dark lord's had broken themselves on the walls of Nair'icaix. Anything in the fortress would be safe.

Even if the child would not be safe, could they afford not to have a child? If anything happened to Harry, the House of Polairix would need to live on. Perhaps even if Harry did die, a son of his could have the power to take his place. This thought process did not continue on much longer because Bellatrix could not bear to dwell on the thought of her husband's potential death.

Would pregnancy impede her? Probably. At first it would only cause some general discomfort. Eventually she would have a hard time getting around. It would be worth it though. Her thoughts were pulled away when she heard Harry draw another deep breath.

Concern welled up inside her as he began to breathe deeper and more frequently. Was there something wrong? Bellatrix quickly put the book away and set to watching him sleep. After a few minutes of

the hyperventilating, he began to toss and turn violently.

"Harry? Are you okay?" she said timidly. When he didn't respond she watched and then decided that waking him up was the best option, if not the easiest. gingerly, she tried to grab him and keep him from tossing. It was to no avail. He didn't want to be touched or held down.

She let go of him and her eyes fell on her wand as an idea popped into her head. The wand was taken from the holder and used to douse Harry's face with cold water. It instantly woke him up and he groaned loudly.

"Are you okay?" Bellatrix asked.

"Just a nightmare." Harry said quietly.

From their past conversations, Bellatrix knew full well what this meant.
"I suppose that Voldemort is happy. How many Muggles died?"

"None." Harry said. "He was planning something. It had to do with St. Mungos."

"That's not good. Can you remember anything else? A small detail? It could make all the difference you know." Bellatrix coached.

Harry sat silently as he raked his mind. Finally he answered, "No. I can't remember anything."

"Maybe tomorrow then." Bellatrix said without much optimism.

"Yeah." Harry said.

"Seven hundred and eighty-eight." Harry whispered. "Seven hundred and eighty-nine." He paused and looked over at Bellatrix's sleeping form. Why can't I sleep that soundly? Harry asked himself demandingly. It wasn't fair. "Seven hundred and ninety."

Help Wanted: Bellatrix Potter will soon be facing possible problems with conception and then getting through the pregnancy. Then of course, there's labor and delivery. However . . . Lord Silvere knows next to nothing about pregnancy. If there's some kind-hearted expert or experts out there who would like to serve as some sort of consultant, Lord Silvere would be much indebted. Please contact him through his profile using either e-mail, review, or IM. Thanks!

Chapter Eighteen

Neville climbed and stood up on a large rock that rested in a peaceful clearing in the Forbidden Forest and surveyed all those who had gathered for the meeting. Snape had advised him that meetings at night and in the dungeons was too regular. Thus, he had decided to hold this meeting on a Friday afternoon.

“Everybody quiet down!” he called. Everyone silenced themselves and turned their attention from friends and surroundings to him. “This meeting of Potter’s Legion is hereby called to order. The first order of business is the induction of a new member. We would like to welcome Professor Tura to our ranks.” Neville gestured toward the Defense teacher who had joined at the back of the crowd.

Murmurs of surprise broke out as everyone turned and studied her. They had not expected a teacher to join, especially one that could be a spy. Neville had discussed the situation with Snape and Snape had agreed that Tura was probably a safe bet. “I assure you all that she is trustworthy.” Neville said.

Fortunately, no one seemed inclined to object to her presence. It probably helped that most of them held her in high esteem. Her classes were always entertaining and she wasn’t an unfriendly teacher.

“Next order of business is the latest from Harry.” Neville said. “The Order of the Phoenix has decided not to acknowledge that anyone other than themselves did any real fighting at Hogsmeade. Harry thinks that it would be best if we allow them to think that.”

“That’s ridiculous!” called out a seventh-year Ravenclaw. “How can they just make that assumption?”

Neville shrugged. “They’re good at thinking up ridiculous things. In their not so humble opinions, Harry was guilty as sin when they threw him into Azkaban. Anyway, Harry apologizes to those of you who deserve recognition but won’t get it. At this point in time, it is best that

we remain silent and unseen.” The statement was followed by a small amount of murmuring that soon died down.

“That leads me to our next point.” Neville continued. “Secrecy. There could be a lot of trouble for everyone here if our existence is discovered. If we are discovered, try your best to hide our connection with Harry. Do not go to Professor Snape for help if something comes up either.”

“Why not?” squeaked one of the few Slytherins who had joined the group. She was a first-year who had made friends with Hufflepuff who had been friends with a Gryffindor.

“Professor Snape could get into trouble for helping us.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. It wasn’t as if Snape was the most friendly fellow around anyway. Another member of PL spoke up. “What do we do if it looks like we’re in big trouble?”

“Hide.” Neville said. “Harry has certain authority around Hogwarts, so whatever you do, don’t leave the Hogwarts grounds. Help can reach you here.” He then spent several minutes instructing them on how to evade questions and the best ways to keep PL secret. They reviewed these tips almost every time they met, but it was still good to keep them fresh.

Harry looked up from his copy of ‘Manipulating Wizarding Governments- A Guide to Devious, Backhanded Politics,’ when Tess entered his study and cleared her throat. “Can I help you?” he asked her, putting the book down.

“Yes, milord.” she said. “Emissaries representing some of your subject have arrived and request an audience with you at your earliest possible convenience. Would you be so inclined to meet with them at this time?”

“Who are they? Harry asked curiously. “The Ice People?”

Tess shook her head nervously. "No, not the Ice People. These people represent the inhabitants of one of the islands that you have dominion over. They're normal humans, aside from the fact that they are all sorcerers."

"Which island is that?"

"They hail from the Dread Island of Trazkaban, milord." Tess said uncomfortably. "Count Hiscophney is Polairix's steward over Trazkaban. These emissaries come from him."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "I suppose that I'll meet with them in the throne room." He stood up, put his book down, and made his way out the room and down toward the large hall with Tess lagging behind. "I don't suppose that you would consider explaining why the emissaries from Trazkaban make you so nervous." Harry said to her.

"It's just that the inhabitants of Trazkaban are not very friendly." Tess gulped. "Uninvited visitors to their island have a tendency to not leave the island alive. It is said that their sorcerers practice the darkest of Dark magic." She paused and then continued speaking with a nervous whisper. "It is also said that one of Count Hiscophney's ancestors was the one who created Dementors."

"I see." Harry said thoughtfully as they entered the massive room . It seemed that Bellatrix had also heard of the visitors and was already standing on the dais next to her own chair. "I'm glad you're here." he said, giving her a smile.

Bellatrix smiled back and then her countenance turned grave. "Tess has probably explained all she knows about Trazkaban. Whatever you do, don't give the emissaries an inch if they are here to ask for things. The last thing you need is Trazkabanians thinking they can circumvent you."

"I hope to make use of them." Harry stated as he thought about his plans. If he wanted to be able to stand up to Britain, his own dominion needed to be in order. That would be impossible if any of the inhabitants of the North were at odds with each other. He sat down,

followed by Bellatrix as every single one of his bodyguards arrived and took their stations near the throne and around the room. “Their magic can be useful, especially in wars.”

The doors opened and several men clad in black outfits with what appeared to be black dragonhide armor strode in arrogantly. Harry watched them. He sensed no ill will from them, but these men were . . . different. A few moments later, they were arrayed before Earl of the North, having no qualms about staring him in the eye.

The one who appeared to be their leader spoke up. “Lord Hiscophney, the Count of Trazkaban, sends his regards to the House of Polairix and the Earl of the North. We hereby reaffirm his House’s commitments to your House.”

“The House of Polairix is happy to welcome Count Hiscophney’s emissaries to Nair’icaix.” Harry stated formally. “It is my wish to strengthen the North and I hope that your lord will see fit to stand at my side when I reveal myself to the world and began to assert myself against Lord Voldemort.”

The lead emissary nodded and fell back. Another one of the emissaries stepped up and gave a minor bow to Harry. “I am Count Hiscophney. Forgive me for the deception, my lord. I felt that it was necessary, considering that the House of Polairix and my ancestors have not always been on the . . . friendliest of terms.”

Harry’s first reaction was to curse himself for being deceived so easily. As soon as he recovered from this, he turned his attention to his ring to see if it could explain what the Count had meant about not being on the friendliest of terms. It revealed that House of Hiscophney had attempted to usurp Polairix for the Earldom of the North at one point in time.

A study of Count Hiscophney soon followed. Harry observed that he appeared to be nearly fifty years old. The count’s former dark hair was slowly going gray. Harry then looked into his emotionless black eyes before responding. “I suppose I can understand your motives.” Harry said slowly.

"I am glad." Hiscophney said. "However, I would like to give you a token of my loyalty."

"What token is that?"

Hiscophney cleared his throat. "Your staff has no doubt informed you of the fact that I and my fellow subjects on Trazkaban are sorcerers and that we practice magic that is rather Dark. I freely admit that."

Harry looked at the count appraisingly. "I don't understand what you're getting at."

"Recently, we were approached by messengers from Lord Voldemort," the count said. "I would have you know that though our ways are Dark and our customs probably quite evil according to your standards, we are not Muggle killers or torturers. We are not, nor will we ever be Death Eaters."

"I would certainly like to think that you are not Death Eaters." Harry said carefully.

Hiscophney smiled predatorily. "I would like you to know so." He then gestured to one of the emissaries who was holding black case. The emissary strode forward and took his place next to Count Hiscophney.

The count then spoke as he opened the box and reached his hand in while the emissary held it. "This is the welcome that Death Eaters can expect on Trazkaban." He drew his hand out and with it came the decapitated head of Rodolphus Lestrange. "I present this trophy to the House of Polairix."

Everybody in the room with the exception of Trazkaban's emissaries let out a shuddering gasp. Bile rose in Harry's throat as he looked at Hiscophney's trophy. Next to him, Harry could hear Bellatrix holding back a startled exclamation of surprise. He unconsciously reached his hand over to hers and gave it a comforting squeeze.

Harry's ring was quick to appraise him on the customs of Trazkaban. According to Trazkabanian custom, Count Hiscophney had just

formally declared war on Lord Voldemort and loyalty to Harry by presenting Lestrange's head to him. Though the gesture was disgusting, Harry had to acknowledge that it was the thought that counted.

Now, what to do with a head? Harry came up with the most diplomatic solution possible. "House Polairix expresses its gratitude to House Hiscophney." Harry said regally. "I am glad to have you on my side and assure you that I now 'know' that you are no Death Eater."

Hiscophney nodded and put the head back into the box. "I am pleased, my lord. What would you have me do to serve you?"

Harry grimaced as he watched the emissary close the box. "If you don't want to keep that head, send it to Voldemort would you? And then would you be so kind as to call on me next week so we can have a meeting to discuss our future plans as to Britain and Voldemort?"

"Of course, my lord." Count Hiscophney said in a pleased voice. "I shall now take my leave." He and his followers gave Harry a short bow and then strode from the throne room looking very pleased with the results of their visit.

Harry then promptly dismissed Tess and the bodyguards from the room. As soon as they were gone, Bellatrix let out a sigh and slumped in her less-ornate throne. "I think that I am going to vomit." she announced weakly.

The House-Sprite magic promptly provided a pan in which she could do so. She took them up on it. As soon as she was done she sat back weakly and closed her eyes. "I know what you're going to say Harry. It isn't your fault. Rodolphus was a bad man and his end was somewhat fitting."

"Actually," Harry replied, "I was afraid that you would be mad at me for allying with them despite the fact that they slaughtered him."

She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Why would I be? You didn’t tell them to decapitate him. Besides, he was a Death Eater.”

“I gave them the impression that such acts were praiseworthy.” Harry countered.

Bellatrix nodded slowly. “Yes, you did. That doesn’t change much however. Rodolphus was a dead man for even touching the soil of Trazkaban. For all you know, he was dead before they ‘harvested’ his head and brought it to you.”

“So then I approved of act of killing anyone who trespasses on their island.”

“Actually, one of your predecessors approved, not you.” came the trademark dry voice of Reggins, Harry’s personal secretary. He appeared a moment later with a short pop and smiled at the look on Harry and Bellatrix’s faces. “I’m sorry to intrude, but I thought it necessary before you got worked up over a non-issue.”

Bellatrix smiled weakly at Reggins. “I’m glad that you did. Harry seems to have a habit of blaming himself for a great deal of things that are not his fault.” She turned to him and took his hand. “With authority, comes responsibility. It’s possible to take too much responsibility though.”

Reggins nodded in agreement and then began to explain what his earlier comment had meant. “Of all the residents in your dominion, the Count of Trazkaban has the most autonomy. Some men who have held that position have even gone so far as to say that you hold no dominion over the island. In fact, during the reign of Lord Polairix IX, the Countess of Trazkaban sieged Nair’icaix.”

“Your point?” Harry inquired.

“Sorry for wandering, my lord.” The ghost said. “Anyway, Trazkaban is recognized as private property. For their loyalty and alliance in the political sector, the House of Polairix grants Trazkaban complete sovereignty and autonomy. Technically, what they do on that island is

none of your business. Even if you didn't want them to kill trespassers, there would be nothing you could do about it."

"I see."

"I'm glad, my lord." Reggins then disappeared.

Bellatrix smiled and squeezed Harry's hand. "See? Not your fault. If you do want to blame someone though, blame Voldemort. He's the one who sent Rodolphus and other fellow Death Eaters to Trazkaban."

Harry nodded sadly. "Everything that has been going wrong can pretty much be traced to him."

"I suppose so." Bellatrix said quietly. "I think that I shall return to my work in the library. It will help keep my mind off . . . things." She then stood up and walked out of the room, leaving Harry to contemplate life as he surveyed his empty throne room.

Who was to blame? Voldemort of course. Then again, he had the power to kill Voldemort, didn't he? So, if he did nothing with that power, then he would be held to blame. On the other hand, it wasn't as if Harry had forced Voldemort to do what he did.

Who was better? A man who used his talents for evil, or a man who did not use his talents at all? It all depends on how you look at it, Harry concluded. So many decision and so many points-of-view.

His reverie was interrupted when one of the doors slammed open and a grumpy woman carrying a bucket of water stomped in. Upon closer inspection, Harry realized that it was Narcissa. She had not noticed him however, so he did nothing to remedy it as she got on her knees and began to scab the floor with a sponge produced from the depths of the foamy water in the bucket.

Narcissa's hair style was now quite simple, yet good looking. The same went with her dress and general appearance. Apparently she

had been making enough money from her services to live as a typical servant did.

Harry's plan to put her in a situation faced by many who actually had to work for their living had apparently been successful. The question was now whether or not she was learning the lesson that she was supposed to learn. Did she have any more respect for those who had been formerly below her?

Unable to resist the urge, Harry reached out with his Legillimency skills and gingerly touched her mind so as not to alert her to his snooping presence. He was quickly disappointed. All Narcissa could see was that the spoiled 'Boy-Who-Lived' was forcing her to do servant stuff. She was afraid of him and continually wondered what Bellatrix saw in him.

With an inward sigh, Harry withdrew. She did not seem to understand that the attitudes of herself, ex-husband, and Voldemort caused pain to so many people. Maybe she needed to be exposed to more of the harsh realities of the world. I'll have to arrange for her to experience some reality as soon as I get the chance, Harry decided.

Chapter Nineteen

Alastor Moody paced outside the ward at St. Mungos in which the Longbottoms were permanently hospitalized. He was waiting for Mrs. Longbottom, Neville's formidable grandmother to finish inside with them. Neville had asked Moody to go and see if he could assess his grandmother's attitude toward one Harry Potter.

She was certainly against Lord Voldemort, but she wasn't a particularly active member in the Order of the Phoenix. If the results of today's meeting were favorable, Mrs. Longbottom would find out about both Harry Potter and her son's involvement with Potter's Legion.

The door to the ward opened and Mrs. Longbottom walked out of it in her usual vulture hat with the big handbag. She smiled at Moody. "Thank you for waiting, Alastor. I've just received some rather pleasant news from one of the healers."

"Oh? What was that, ma'am?" Moody asked politely as they made their way down the hall and eventually toward the Apparition point.

"Frank and Alice seemed more responsive to my voice and presence today." Mrs. Longbottom pronounced proudly. "The ward's resident healer seems to think that this is a sign that they are coming out of their mental condition. He thinks that frequent visits from family members would help their recovery immensely."

Moody smiled at Mrs. Longbottom. "That's wonderful news. I imagine that maybe a visit from Neville could do wonders as well. Do you have any plans to have him visit soon?"

She shrugged indifferently. "When school gets out I suppose. They would hardly recognize him I think. Besides, I would not want to get his hopes up for nothing. The healer stressed that maybe they would go back to normal within a few days or weeks."

"At least they're still alive." Moody said carefully, making an attempt to segue the conversation into a discussion about the Potter family and then onto Harry.

"Ah, yes. The Potters. Do you know how young Harry is these days?" Mrs. Longbottom said, unknowingly taking Moody's bait.

"Well . . ." Moody said as he launched into the whole story. A half-hour and several blocks down the street later, he had related the whole story concerning Harry and Potter's Legion. Neville's grandmother had shown little emotion throughout, and Moody hoped that he had not just made a mistake.

Mrs. Longbottom smiled. "The whole thing with young Mr. Potter seems rather confusing, Alastor. I can't help but be proud of Neville though. He's become a natural born leader. I reckon that the skill will come in handy."

"Yes, I'm sure it will. I was wondering if you would consider working with those of us who believe Harry innocent against You-Know-Who." Moody said hopefully.

Longbottom sighed. "Of course I'll help. Potter is likely not happy with certain people in our world right now. We need people that he would have no enmity against. I can't guarantee my skill in a fight with Death Eaters however."

"Not everyone has to be a front line fighter." Moody said wisely as he thought about the situation with Frank and Alice.

Though Mrs. Longbottom seemed to be on his side, there would still be no convincing of her to allow Neville to visit his parents before the end of the term at Hogwarts. In his not so humble opinion, he thought that Neville should visit as soon as possible. Not only that, if the Longbottoms were to recover . . .

Harry looked thoughtfully at the conference table and chairs which dominated the small room in Nair'icaix that he now stood in. His studies had excelled greatly and according to Bellatrix, he could easily rival any of the best duelists of the wizarding world. That meant

that there was no longer any excuse for him not to do anything against Voldemort. This meeting would set things in motion.

There was a knock on the double doors and it opened to reveal Bess who bowed formally to Harry. "Milord Polairix, may I present Lord Hiscophney, Count of Trazkaban."

The count then strode in with a feral grin and Harry gave a smile while holding out his hand. "I'm pleased that you could come, Count."

Hiscophney took Harry's hand and shook it firmly. "It is of course an honor, my Lord."

Harry considered asking him to call him Harry, but decided against it. Count Trazkaban seemed to be set on formality and Harry needed all the presence of authority that he could get at this meeting and the many others to follow. However, he still spoke. "I hope that you don't mind, but I also invited Queen Xerina to attend this meeting as well."

"Not at all." the count replied magnanimously.

"Good." Harry said as he gestured for the count to take a chair. The count did so and he followed suit. Why was he being so friendly? Weren't the relations between Hiscophney and Polairix tense at the best of times? The ring quickly informed him that count had gained quite a bit of status by allying with Polairix. Harry put his mind at rest knowing that the count had no ulterior motives that would harm him.

After a very short wait, Bess presented Queen Xerina. The two men stood up and welcomed her before all three sat down. "I had not expected to see you here, Count." Xerina said, with a surprised smile.

"Well, here I am." Hiscophney said as a nervous smile crossed his lips.

Harry watched them thoughtfully. Apparently the two rulers knew each other or had at least met at some point in time prior to the meeting. That could be good, or bad. Nevertheless, it was time to

press on with his goals. "I've called you both here so that we can discuss the upcoming hostilities with Lord Voldemort."

"What makes you so certain that such fighting will occur?" Xerina asked.

"Because I am against what Voldemort is doing and if I don't go against him, he'll try to kill me anyway." Harry said. "It will be only a matter of time before the fighting comes to our doorstep. I think that we would be better off fighting at his doorstep."

Hiscophney nodded, this time with a more serious attitude. "Yes, war will come eventually. I've already refused an alliance with Voldemort. In his eyes, I am now the enemy. Whether or not I am his enemy, he will come against me once Britain falls."

"Point conceded." Xerina said.

"Good." Harry stated. "However, this war will not as simple as killing Voldemort. The Ministry of Magic is against me personally- and at this point in time, barely acknowledges that Voldemort is a force to be reckoned with. We will have to change that. The Ministry must acknowledge fully the dangers it will soon face."

"Yes, that does make it a little more difficult." Hiscophney muttered thoughtfully as he considered what Harry had said. "I take it that you don't want to wage total war against this Ministry. Would that be correct?"

Harry nodded. "There are many good people who work in the Ministry. Their leadership is just a bit awry. Basically, I want to fix the Ministry and then do whatever I can against Voldemort."

"Diplomacy for the Ministry, war against the Death Eaters." Xerina said, summing up Harry's basic goal.

Hiscophney nodded sensibly. "That will work. I suggest that you divide your efforts between working with the Ministry of Magic and fighting against Voldemort. I would gladly volunteer to lead any forces

or expeditions that are sent against Death Eaters. I also have some ‘contacts’ in the Ministry and other places that could prove to be useful.”

“I can help with diplomacy.” Xerina volunteered. “You can appoint me as some sort of ambassador or liaison to make it more official. Then of course, the Ice Army is yours to use.”

“Okay, that sounds like a good set up.” Harry said. “I can’t think of a way to deploy our forces unless we have intelligence that is quick enough to get us to any Death Eater attacks. So, Hiscophney, why don’t you assemble a small group force that is ready to go at a moments notice in the case that we are alerted to some sort of attack.”

“As you wish, my lord.” Hiscophney said readily.

“Xerina, get ready to open negotiations with the Ministry of Magic. You should probably try to connect their law enforcement assets with our own group so that we can help fight. Any intelligence they can provide will be valuable. However, do not let them know who I am. If they know that they’re dealing with Harry Potter, it will sour everything up before it even starts.” Harry instructed.

“Of course.” Xerina said.

Hiscophney then cleared his throat. “I just thought of something. Where does the special force stay and how do you contact it yourself and let them know when to move?”

“I didn’t think of that.” Harry mused. “It would depend I suppose. Are you going to have your people in the group, or a combination of Ice People and your people?”

“For the sake of simplicity, let’s just stick with my people for now.” the count decided.

Harry nodded and he tried to think up a way for him to communicate quickly with the count. Finally a solution presented itself and saved

Harry some thought. The ring glowed and Harry realized that he could connect other rings to it. "Do you have a ring or a piece of jewelry that you wear often?"

"Just my signet ring." the count replied.

"That will do." Harry announced as he held up the hand with the ring. "Touch your ring to mine and that will connect them. We then can communicate through them with out thoughts."

Xerina held out her hand which also bore a ring and smiled. "Don't leave me out."

The three leaders then touched the faces of their rings to each other at the same time and the rings all glowed for a brief amount of time. When the light coming from them faded away, Harry gave the system a test run. 'Can you hear me?' he thought, directing his mind toward the ring and then by proxy to Hiscophney and Xerina.

Two seperate voices chimed in his head, "I can."

Harry smiled happily. "Good. Now that we can communicate like that, you can just station the forces your assemble on your own island for now." They then decided on a date for their next meeting and then adjourned.

Neville strolled down the hall after having a conversation with Professor Tura which brought her up to speed on all the events that had occurred during the year with regard to Potter's Legion. She seemed to be very concerned about fitting in with the group and often asked if the fact that she had never met Harry would matter. He assured her that it likely wouldn't.

"CONSTANT VIGILANCE!" roared a familiar voice just as Neville stepped past a statue which depicted one of the Founders.

Neville rolled his eyes without even blinking. "You're going to have to find a new way to surprise me, Moody. You've used that one on me too often."

“If you take that attitude, then things that would be considered normal will take you by surprise every time, lad.” Mad-Eye lectured as he removed his Invisibility Cloak and fell into step with Neville as he made his way down the hall.

“Sure . . .” Neville said, not quite understanding what Moody was trying to get at. He wasn’t willing to try and figure the whole thing out though, it would only confuse him more. “I don’t suppose that you came to call on a social visit.”

Moody shook his head gravely. “I am afraid that I’ve come to discuss a slightly personal matter. Is there a place in which we can have a private conversation and not be overheard?”

An amused snort came from Neville. “In this castle, the walls have ears. There are a lot of walls.”

“Try your best to find a suitable accommodation.” Moody instructed dryly.

“As you wish.” Neville snickered. He abruptly turned into a door that they came upon and entered the room. Moody’s face blanched when he saw that the door had a sign on it proclaiming the room to be a girl’s restroom. “If Myrtle isn’t here . . .”

Moody shook his head and closed the door with a locking charm. They did not need anybody walking in on them like this. Neville, meanwhile, methodically opened all the stalls to check for interlopers and found none. Myrtle was not present. Moody spoke when Neville signaled that all was clear. “First of all, son- what did you mean by the walls having ears?”

“Apparently, I’m the prime suspect in the school’s investigation against the leader of this rogue Defense group that seems to be meeting under everyone’s noses.” Neville said. “I’ve had Dumbledore, McGonagall, and other Order members trailing me everywhere.”

“I see.”

Neville pulled out his wand and conjured a pair of chairs for them to sit in. “What did you want to talk about?”

Moody sighed and took one of the offered seats. “I wanted to talk about your parents, Neville.” He held his hands up when he saw Neville’s expression change. “Hear me out. I was at St. Mungo’s today to meet with your grandmother about Potter.”

“Oh? How did that go?” Neville interrupted, interested to hear about his grandmother’s position before they moved onto the serious things.

“She seems to be willing to support us.” Moody answered. “The point is that when she came out, she told me that your parents seem to have . . . improved a bit.”

Neville looked at Moody as excitement slowly welled up inside him. “Really? How so?”

“They seem to be more responsive to other people.” Moody revealed. He then continued to explain everything that Mrs. Longbottom had told him after she had visited them and then finished with his grandmother’s decision to wait til summer to let him visit.

Joy seemed to be bursting from Neville, though he was doing his best to retain his reserve and not let it overcome him. He was disappointed however. Summer wasn’t really all that far away, but it was still a while away. Then he realized that the aged Auror had not come to Hogwarts to taunt him. “There’s more to this. What is it?”

A pause followed before Moody explained. “Before the First War ended, your parents were developing a rather important spell that we hoped would be able to take You-Know-Who down once and for all.”

“Would it have taken him down?” Neville asked carefully. “Without a doubt?”

“No one is really sure about that.” Alastor answered. “The spell was designed to target the core of evil in a person, at least that’s how your

parents described it. Even if it was not capable of being efficiently used against You-Know-Who, it would be able to at least fight evil in any way that it was manifested.”

“Interesting.” Neville said as he carefully dissected the new information. Moody was content to wait him out. Finally, Neville came to some conclusions. “You think that it would be helpful if my parents recovered and were able to complete the spell.”

“Yes.” Moody said affirmatively. “Their prognosis is positive right now. There’s a small chance of complete recovery. I think that if you were able to visit with them, they might somehow improve more. Unfortunately, your grandmother isn’t inclined to let you visit for a while. The sooner the better, I think.”

The teenage boy had already come to these conclusions about his parents however. The ex-auror had not gotten to it yet, but Neville was quite sure that he would propose that he sneak away from Hogwarts and visit on a weekend or night. Would it be worth the risk though? “We should ask Harry what the best step is.” Neville said to Moody. “If he says to go ahead, then I’m all for visiting my parents as soon as possible.”

“Of course.” Moody said, pleased that the boy had been able to grasp the meaning and necessity of the situation by himself. He was truly becoming quite mature. “Send an owl to Harry tonight though.”

“Why?”

“The Dark Lord knew of your parent’s work. It won’t be long before he hears about their improving condition.”

The blood drained from Neville’s face and he gave Moody a hasty goodbye before making his way to the owlery, already conjuring the necessary writing utensils.

Harry studied a very tense Neville from across the dining room table in Nair’icaix. He had received a urgent letter from Neville quite late in the evening and had decided that it would be best for all parties concerned if the whole situation was discussed immediately. A

portkey had been instantly mailed and as soon as Neville had arrived, Harry arranged for a midnight snack of sorts.

"So, should I visit my parents before the end of term or not?" Neville asked, realizing that despite his strong feelings on the situation, Harry might possibly be able to see it from a clearer point of view.

A smile crossed Harry's face. "Only if you can ensure that you don't get caught. They would expel you from Hogwarts for sure if you were caught off the grounds like that." He then grew somber as he continued to address Neville. "It's not whether or not you should visit that bothers me about the situation."

"Voldemort?" Neville supplied.

"Yes." Harry nodded. "I'm not sure as to whether it can be done or not, but St. Mungos should have its security staff increased somehow. Maybe it would even be best to move your parents to a safer location."

"To where?"

"Maybe here. I don't know the extent of your parent's condition though. Would it be even safe to move them?" Harry mused as he grabbed a small sandwich from a silver platter and shoved it into his mouth.

Realizing that despite his frequent visits, he still didn't know that sort of information, Neville shrugged. "If I visit, I could try to find out more about the situation. There's always the possibility that what they were working on could be helpful to you as well."

"You've already sold me on visiting them. There would be nothing I would want more if I were in your position." Harry declared with a grin. "I'm sure that they could help as well. I would advise visiting them late at night and if possible, on a weekend. The regular staff won't be at the hospital and therefore, the normal staff won't tattle on you. Get Moody or someone to help make you a Portkey."

“What about security?”

“I’ll talk to Bellatrix about that. She knows more about my power over St. Mungos since she’s the one who went and bought it.” Harry answered as he picked up the rubber ducky that had served as Neville’s Portkey and reset it for Hogwarts.

Neville grinned. “Thanks, Harry!” He then disappeared.

“My pleasure.” Harry said pleasantly to no one in particular as he realized that he was actually fairly sleepy. He then quickly made his way up to his room and attempted to climb into bed as silently as possible so as not to wake Bellatrix.

His attempts failed however, evidenced by Bellatrix rolling over and cuddling up to him. She didn’t say anything, but Harry was pretty sure that she had stayed awake waiting for him. He smiled, basking in the feeling of being loved by someone so dearly.

Chapter Twenty

“Are you sure that no one is going to give us a second-glance?” Lavender demanded in a fierce whisper and she, Neville, and Parvati walked through the halls of St. Mungo’s to the ward that the Longbottoms resided in.

Parvati rolled her eyes. “Why would they? That receptionist lady was surprised that we even bothered to check in! Crappy security if you ask me.”

“Well, who visits their poor dying relatives late on a weekend?” Lavender demanded. “Someone will realize that we’re Hogwarts students and then we’ll get caught for sneaking out of the castle.”

“People like us.” Neville answered for Parvati. “And my parents are not dying for your information.” He was too excited to take consequence of Lavender’s comments however. Snape had reassured them before they left that he did not think that Voldemort even considered the Longbottoms a threat. That would simplify things.

The three teens quickly arrived at the appropriate ward and both Parvati and Lavender elected to wait outside the door while Neville had some time with his parents. They did not really want to interfere. Neville was relieved because he feared that strange people might hinder his efforts.

He quickly entered the ward, careful not to disturb any of the patients that might be sleeping. Fortunately for him, Lockhart, who was still a resident, was conked out. To his delight, his parents seemed to be playing some sort of card game at a table. Unfortunately, the game didn’t look particularly active, more like a play that had been performed one too many times.

Gingerly, Neville approached them. “Mom, Dad? Can you hear me?” There was no response, though the monotonous card game seemed to slow a bit, almost as if something was distracting the mentally incompetent couple.

Further attempts to get their attention with his voice failed so he finally gave up and approached them. Neville tapped his mother on the shoulder and she still failed to respond. He got the same result with his father. He sighed and pulled a chair to the table and sat at it, forcing the couple to at least see him somehow.

As soon as he sat down, they looked at him, somehow sensing the intrusion upon their game. Neville knew very well that this was of course normal behavior. Most patients like this would not respond to the same stimulus, but the couple had been Aurors. It was hardwired into them to at least acknowledge any sort of movement around them.

"Mom, Dad, it's me. Your son." Neville said, his voice shaking despite his best attempts to hide his anguish.

There was no response from Frank, but Alice's sapphire blue eyes seemed to gain an 'awareness' for a short moment. It faded away quickly however. Despite the disappointment, Neville could help but feel that progress had definitely been made.

A second-attempt at trying to talk to Frank and Alice was ruined when the door to the ward flew open with a loud bang admitting a very distraught Parvati whose wand was drawn. "Neville! We have company!"

Section break

Hermione wrote the last word on her history essay with a flourish and smiled. The last of her homework was officially finished and she would have the rest of the weekend to relax with herself and Ron. She looked across the table at Ron who was playing with a Quidditch model as he planned for the next game.

She was just about to ask him about his game plans when the portrait hole opened to admit Professor McGonagall who looked to be in a panicked state. "Mr. Weasley, Miss Granger, please report to Professor Dumbledore's office immediately. Bring your cloaks and a wand." The aged professor then left.

Without wasting a single moment, both Ron and Hermione leapt up and ran to their separate dormitories to retrieve their cloaks before running with each other down to the Headmaster's office. When they arrived they found several Order members gathered., Professor Dumbledore had just began to address them all when they arrived.

"Death Eaters are attacking St. Mungos as we speak. I don't think I need to describe the potential casualties that could occur. A team needs to be immediately assembled to assist the Ministry in putting the attackers down."

"We can go!" Ron volunteered as Hermione nodded fiercely. "It's not as if we can stay behind to help with any casualties or to deal with Ministry officials."

Several other Order members volunteered and then Dumbledore assigned other to stay behind in his office to keep latecomers apprised as to the current situation. "Send Moody and anyone else with fighting skills to St. Mungos when they arrive." he directed as he made a Portkey to take them all to the front entrance of the hospital.

Section break

"What kind of company?" Neville asked as he quickly drew his wand and stood up from his parent's card table.

Parvati looked behind her before answering. "Death Eaters. I don't know how many. Lavender and I managed to stun a scout that came up to this floor. From the racket downstairs, I would estimate that there are quite a few."

Neville bit his tongue to keep from uttering a curse. How could the Death Eaters be so mean as to decide to attack a load of helpless wizards and witches in a hospital? There were probably children too. Goose bumps popped up all over his skin as he realized that the Death Eaters were probably here for his parents.

"They'll be coming up to this floor eventually." Neville announced as he stepped outside into the hall with Parvati to join Lavender who was

looking up and down the hall with a panicked look on her face. “You two can take the Portkey back to Hogwarts, I’ll stay to help defend.”

Parvati stiffened for a moment and then shared a glance with Lavender before speaking. “We’re staying with you, Neville. We want to help defend the hospital and your parents just as much as you do.”

“If that’s what you want.” Neville said with a little hesitation. He took a look down the hall. “Which way would the Death Eaters come to access this floor? Can they get up from both ways?”

“I don’t think so.” Lavender said slowly as she gestured toward the mostly empty hallway. “I don’t think that they can get up here from that way.”

Neville smiled. “That’s a small relief.” He then turned the opposite way and briskly walked toward the staircase. Parvati and Lavender promptly made to follow him, but as soon as they got close to the staircase, a Death Eater came rushing up. “Stupefy!” cried Neville.

The Death Eater taken by surprise didn’t even get his own curse shot off before he fell. “Round one for the good guys!” Parvati crowed.

“Very funny.” Neville said dryly as they clambered down the staircase. They didn’t meet any other Death Eaters until they reached the next floor down. “Don’t let yourselves get too distracted while fighting.”

Section break

The Portkey activated and Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, and several other Order members found themselves on the main floor of St. Mungos in the middle of a massive skirmish between Death Eaters and the small hospital staff.

“Stunners at will.” Dumbledore commanded. “Try to take as many of them alive as possible. Make sure that their fellow Death Eaters aren’t able to revive them though.”

Without waiting another moment, Ron and Hermione jumped into the fight, fiercely shooting off stunners and other hexes at every Death Eater that could be seen. Hermione noticed that the Death Eaters seemed to be falling a little too easily to the forces at hand. She shrugged this off as she zapped another masked and cloaked figure into oblivion.

In just a few moments, everybody wearing black with white masks was down and Ron was madly laughing at their fallen opponents. It was then, that Hermione noticed three people that should not have been there. "Neville? Parvati? Lavender?" she questioned loudly.

This drew the attention of Professor Dumbledore who quickly spotted the three Hogwarts students as well. "Mr. Longbottom, I must ask what you and your two friends are doing here."

"Just thought that we could lend a helping hand." Parvati said, smiling rather nervously.

"I don't remember you coming with us." Ron said fiercely.

Dumbledore motioned for silence with his hand as he studied the Neville and the two girls intently. "You were here before the attack begun, weren't you? I assume that you heard about your parent's improved condition and decided to visit them."

"So what if I did?" Neville asked, knowing full well what Dumbledore would say, but still feeling belligerent nevertheless.

"You are in violation of several school rules!" Dumbledore said coldly. "You could have been injured or even killed. Make no mistake, Mr. Longbottom, Miss Patil, and Miss Brown- you are all in serious trouble for leaving the school grounds like this. As soon . . ."

The sentence was left uncompleted as an extremely loud explosion rocked the foundations of the hospital. Despite the fact that all the Death Eaters seemed to be down, someone was still firing curses at something. Everyone except Dumbledore froze, waiting for it to happen again.

The aged professor swiftly made his way to one of the fallen figures and ripped a mask off to reveal a featureless blob for a face. “Dummies!” Dumbledore exclaimed angrily. “The hospital is still under attack! These were only decoys!”

Everyone started to get ready for another round, but Neville, Parvati, and Lavender were interrupted by Dumbledore. “You three will be returning to Hogwarts immediately. As soon as you get back we’ll deal with your delinquency.” He then shoved a foot long stick into their hands. “This is a one-time emergency portkey. Say the name of the place you want to go and it will take you there. Now go back to Hogwarts and wait for me in my office.”

“Do you really think that you can face this attack with your forces alone? I doubt that the Ministry will do anything in time.” Neville asked defiantly.

Professor Dumbledore refused to answer, but the looks that the Order members were shooting each other was evidence enough of their lack of capability to face a full fledged Death Eater attack. Another explosion punctuated Neville’s conclusion.

“That is none of your concern. You are not qualified to fight in a situation like this. Now go!” Dumbledore said to Neville.

Neville grinned cheekily. “I’ll go.” He then made sure that Parvati and Lavender had a firm grip on the Portkey. Seeing that this was the case, he said the name of his destination quietly. “Nair’icaix.”

Section break

Feeling himself being shaken, Harry woke up to find a very anxious looking Tess peering into his bleary eyes. “Milord! There’s a Death Eater attack in progress.”

Harry sat up and glanced at a nearby clock. It told him that he had only been asleep for a very short while. He looked around and saw

Neville, Parvati, and Lavender standing behind Tess. “What is happening?” he asked them, dreading the answer.

“We went to visit my parents at St. Mungos and a whole lot of Death Eaters started attacking.” Neville explained. He then went on to recount all that had happened up to the point when he and the girls Portkeyed away.

“You’ll have to get back to Hogwarts to avoid any further trouble.” Harry decided as he quickly thought up several potential solutions. “I would let you fight, but I do believe that I have the resources to deal with this and you’re already in enough trouble.” He quickly reached over and gently prodded Bellatrix who was close to waking up.

She woke up and took in the scene silently before speaking. “Let me guess, St. Mungos.”

“How did you know?” Harry asked with a frown.

“Lucky guess.” Bellatrix yawned.

Deciding not to press the matter any further, Harry turned back to Neville. “Once you get back to Hogwarts, do whatever you can to make sure you don’t get expelled immediately. I’ll try to get there before anything serious happens.”

“Would they expel us?” Parvati asked, looking shocked.

“Probably.” Harry answered. “Neville, what would you like me to do about your parents? Would you like me to try and move them here? That might be the safest option.”

There was a short silence before Neville answered. “I’ll trust you to do what you think is best.”

“Good, I’ll try not to disappoint you.” Harry replied. He hopped out of bed and grabbed his wand. “Here, I’ll reset your one-time Portkey. Dumbledore won’t even have to know that you made a slight detour on the way here.”

Lavender handed him the stick and Harry promptly recast the spell that had been on the stick before. "That should do it." he said as he handed it back to them. "Don't tell anyone about our meeting until I tell you that it's okay."

"Will do." Neville said. "You aren't unhappy about this, are you?"

"Why would I be?" Harry inquired. "It's not your fault."

Neville nodded happily. "I'll let you do what you have to then." He then activated the Portkey, leaving he, Bella, and Tess alone in the room.

"There's bound to be quite a few casualties." Harry stated as he quickly made his way over to his wardrobe and began to dress, choosing a set of black robes with silver embroidery on the arms and collar. "I'll go to St. Mungos and get Hiscophney and his team to come with me. You two prepare to take on casualties and patients from the hospital. I don't know if the hospital will still be standing when all is said and done."

"We don't have very many doctors on hand." Bellatrix pointed out.

Choosing to wait for a moment to respond to Bellatrix's comment, Harry activated his link with Xerina through the ring. A short conversation later, he had the guarantee that several doctors would be on their way to Nair'icaix immediately. "Xerina is sending some." Harry said.

Bellatrix nodded happily and then joined Harry to help him strap on his breastplate and then cloak while he arranged for reinforcements with Count Hiscophney through the ring connection. "You'll have one advantage at least," Bellatrix said, "you own the controlling shares of stock for St. Mungos. You can just take charge on grounds that it's your property."

"I imagine that it will come in handy." Harry said as he quickly checked to make sure that both his wands were ready. "Nailoff!"

The captain of his bodyguard entered the room very quickly. Harry attributed it to the fact that he had probably been waiting for a summons. "Yes, my lord?"

"Assemble some of your men. We're going to break a Death Eater raid." Harry commanded.

"I've already assembled a squad, sir." Nailoff replied with a grin. Several men then entered the room and took their places behind the captain. "We're ready when you are."

"Good." Harry said.

Bellatrix hugged Harry and pecked him on the lips. "Try to avoid injury." she told him softly. "Portkey all the casualties to the main entrance hall. We'll figure out what to do with them from there."

Harry smiled at her and then pulled his Black Ash wand from its holster. The bodyguards followed suit, and they quickly Apparated to the battle. Hopefully, the Count of Trazkaban had been successful in getting his men to the correct rendezvous location.

Section break.

"Drop your wands." Lucius Malfoy commanded as he grinned at the surrounded Order members. He had chosen to remove his mask while all the other Death Eaters holding their wands on the prisoners kept them on. "Resistance is futile, the Ministry will most certainly not come thanks to my arrangements, and you can only die if you fight."

Hermione was very confused. If this had been a simple raid, then the Death Eaters would have retreated at the first sign of resistance. Voldemort certainly wanted raids, but he didn't want Death Eaters to die unless he was after something. Several Death Eaters had died during the fighting. "What do you want here?" she demanded.

"Take a wild guess." Lucius laughed. "I bet that Dumbledore has a pretty good idea."

“You won’t get away with this.” Dumbledore advised. “Besides, is it worth it to have so many crimes over your head just for the blood of two ex-Aurors who couldn’t harm you if they tried?”

Lucius shook his head disbelievingly. “Do you really think that they couldn’t harm us? There are powers rising that could very well heal the Longbottoms. But you’re too blind to realize that, aren’t you? You were certainly blind enough to send Potter to Azkaban, weren’t you? I bet he could have healed the Longbottoms.”

“Could and would are not the same, Malfoy.” Dumbledore stated.

The rich pure-blood Death Eater began to laugh sardonically. “You just don’t get it, do you? You must be the stupidest person I’ve ever met. It doesn’t matter though, the Longbottoms will die tonight.”

“I don’t really think so.” came a cold voice. “Nitracit incendio maximus!”

Everyone turned toward the location in which the voice had come from just in time to see a gigantic ball of blue fire zoom toward the Death Eaters and explode at their feet, causing robes to catch on fire. Abruptly, several figures Apparated into the room, some with small pops, others with loud bangs.

However, this show did not distract everyone from the person who had cast the fire curse. Ron was one of these and was also the first to recognize the person. He yelled out incredulously, grabbing everyone’s attention. “Harry?”

Chapter Twenty-One

Harry scowled when he realized that Ron and several other Order members had just recognized him. He should have remembered to wear his hood up but in all the excitement, he had forgotten. It was probably for the best anyway. Casting curses and spells was a little harder when a cloak limited one's visibility. "Ron?" Harry retorted sarcastically, as everyone in the room stared at him.

"Leave the Longbottoms alone, Harry." Dumbledore said in what he hoped was a soothing voice. "They have never done any harm to you and are not capable of harming you at this point in time."

Anger surged through Harry's veins. How could they assume that he was here to attack Neville's parents? It was some nerve they had. "Why would I harm them?" he growled menacingly.

"They're a danger to you!" Ron yelled irrationally. "Just like they're a danger to you or anyone else who thinks they can practice the Dark Arts."

"I'm not here to harm the Longbottoms in any way whatsoever." Harry announced. "I'd also like to say that I'm innocent of all crimes that I stand accused of. I would never help Voldemort do anything. He killed my parents!"

Dumbledore's face paled as he drew some immediate and erroneous conclusions. Harry wasn't here to kill the Longbottoms. He wanted to use them. "Do you think that you can destroy Voldemort with your hate, Harry? You'll become worse than Voldemort was! Your victory will be as Dark as your defeat! I know that you don't see what you did on Privet Drive as a crime, but nevertheless- you did kill innocents."

"I DIDN'T KILL ANYBODY!" Harry roared at the Order who after Dumbledore's statement were looking at him as if someone had just announced that he killed babies for a living.

"Harry," Hermione said in a shaking voice, "please give yourself up. You can only go down from here. You don't want to become like the

man who made you an orphan. We'll try to see to it that you stay out of Azkaban. We'll get you help."

A throbbing sensation began to assault Harry's head as his anger skyrocketed despite his ability to acknowledge the irony of Hermione offering him something she didn't have to give. They were lying to him. They wanted him dead. "Why won't you listen to me?" he whispered harshly, trying to control himself.

"You must listen to US." Dumbledore told him.

"Listen to ME!" Harry barked.

Ron laughed at him. "You don't deserve to be listened to. You bloody murderer and traitor."

Before Harry could react, Hiscophney, who had unobtrusively taken a position on Harry's right flank, dashed forward and lifted Ron off the ground, gripping his throat with one hand. "You will address the Earl of the North with respect." he said coldly. He then threw Ron to the ground and rejoined Harry.

The assembled members of the Order gasped audibly as the new information sank in. They knew that they needed the Earl to win against Voldemort. Unfortunately, it seemed to them that the Earl would be worse than Voldemort.

"You must surrender yourself." Dumbledore implored as thoughts about the revelation darted throughout his mind. "Would you shame the House of Polairix by tainting its reputation? What would your mother think? I'm sure that a plea bargain could be made."

Harry literally could not think. There were too many things assaulting his mind. Dumbledore shouldn't be so concerned about 'tainting' a House's reputation. He was only saying that. He was also angry that the Ministry could be depended on to let an alleged murderer walk free on such a plea bargain. Out of all this, a random thought emerged. 'I need a Pensieve.'

"My lord," Hiscophney said, "it's useless. They can't see and they won't listen. We must take action before the Death Eaters can do any more damage."

"We'll talk later." Harry spat at Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, and all the Order. "But know this, not only will I eradicate Voldemort and his Death Eaters, I will fix your pitiful Ministry." He then turned to Hiscophney and Nailoff. "You know what you need to do. As for the Order, leave them be unless they attack you. If they do attack, stun them and escort them from the building."

Hiscophney bowed formally for the Order's benefit. "Of course, my Lord." By insulting Polairix, they were insulting him. This 'Order' would have to learn its lesson soon. Maybe he could rough them up a little.

By this time, the Death Eaters had recovered from his fire curse and another battle had broken out between them and the Order. Those that had arrived with Harry immediately joined the fight. The Ice soldiers darted nimbly around the room shooting off spells while those from Trazkaban imperiously made their way through the battle ignoring the curses that bounced off invisible shields all while shooting stunners and other curses from the palms of their hands.

Harry contented himself to staying out of the midst of it and firing random, but extremely powerful and effective spells toward the Death Eaters. Once he saw that Hiscophney would have no trouble on the ground floor alone with his men, Harry motioned for Nailoff and his men to join him at the foot of the stairs. He only hoped that they would be able to Portkey all the patients out.

"Did you see him?" Ron exclaimed to Hermione as they darted around a corner to dodge an oncoming spell. "He must not have drowned like everyone assumed. I bet he was in cahoots with You-Know-Who for a while before deciding to go off on his own. That must be how he knew about the attack."

"Honestly!" Hermione yelled in a very exasperated voice. "You can't just make those kind of conclusions." She had effectively recovered

her composure after the battle had resumed. It seemed that fighting Death Eaters was easier than confronting her old friend.

Ron considered this point grimly. "He has to be working for himself then," he said grimly. "I don't know what's going on with the Longbottoms, but I bet he wants them or something. If he wanted them dead, he would have just let Malfoy do it for him."

The hallway was clear for a moment and Ron chose that point to dash out and let off a string of spells and hexes toward the Death Eaters who were grouped for the most part in the main reception area. They had congregated there after the creepy men that Harry was with had spread down the halls to pick off stragglers.

"I'm not so sure." Hermione yelled nervously as she covered his back, nervously holding her wand out in front of her.

"We can talk about this later!" Ron declared as he took down a stray Death Eater.

The hallway in which the Longbottom's ward was located had been the host of a group of Death Eaters, but several 'triplexio' stunners from Harry's wand had taken care of the situation promptly. Remembering which door led to the Longbottoms, Harry made his way into their ward and found Neville's parents playing a card game, oblivious to the battle going on in the hospital.

"What should we do about them?" asked Captain Nailoff.

Harry shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure. We should probably move them to Nair'icaix permanently, but the best medical care may be here. There's also a chance that moving them may prove to be harmful to them."

"Are there records around here somewhere?" asked one of the young Ice men. "I was an intern for a doctor before I joined the Ice Army. I should be able to ascertain their condition from any documentation."

"That should be handy." Harry commented, glad that he had someone who knew something about medical care with him. He stepped over to the Longbottom's beds and looked around. Nothing. "Blast. Any ideas?"

The bodyguards quickly searched the room and turned up nothing. "We might need to go to the nurse's station." another guard suggested.

"I should have thought of that." Harry said ruefully. "I hope the hall is still clear." They made their way to the ward's door and stepped out into the hall to meet several more Death Eaters who had managed to escape from the melee downstairs.

The one shot an Imperio curse at Harry, which he shook off without any thought. Since the Death Eaters had expected the Imperio to work, they had not prepared to take on Harry who wandlessly threw them down the hall while the Ice guards peppered them with stunners and body-bind hexes.

Harry placed a strong locking jinx on the ward and they ran down the hall and found a desk with a sign that pronounced it as the official nurse's station. Harry wasted no time in getting behind it and finding a file drawer filled with records pertaining to patients on the floor. He rifled through the open drawer and found the files he was looking for. "Frank Longbottom," and "Alice Longbottom."

He yanked them out from between the other files and thrust them toward the ex-intern who sorted through the records while the other guards checked the surrounding hallways for more Death Eaters. Harry joined them on the other side of the desk and watched the guard read the records.

Finally the young man pronounced judgement. "I don't see why this couple is even in the hospital." he said thoughtfully. "Their only problem seems to be that fact that they're rather 'spaced' as you Muggles call it."

"We'll be taking them with us." Harry decided out loud. "Back to their room!"

Hermione cried with frustration as Lucius Malfoy's leg-locker curse hit her and caused her to fall to the ground. He had been chasing her through the hallways for several minutes, though it seemed like an hour to Hermione.

She rolled over and attempted to perform the counter-curse, however- Malfoy quickly disarmed her with 'Expelliarmus.' He approached her with a feral grin.

"It's Draco's favorite mudblood." he announced with amusement. "Always showing him up in class and dishonoring the name of Malfoy."

"The only dishonor your name has comes from your alliances!" Hermione growled.

The expression on Malfoy's face grew frigid. "Perhaps I ought to take you home with me so that young Draco can teach you a few things, Mudblood."

Hermione had no answer for this as she felt herself go cold and shiver at the thought of what Malfoy seemed to be proposing. The idea of the cliche tactic of trying to get the captor to talk suddenly surfaced in Hermione's mind. "Looks like Potter spoiled your party. You should have expected it though. He's just like you."

Malfoy laughed. "You must be kidding me, Mudblood. Why would he even 'think' like me? No, I'm afraid that Mr. Potter is a lost cause for the Dark Lord's ideas."

"I know what kind of person he is!" Hermione exclaimed. "He proved his character during the last Christmas vacation."

"Did he now?" Malfoy said, his smile growing broader.

Lucius was about to speak again when he was interrupted. "So, the battle-leader decides to hide down a hall with a girl." came a voice from the hall intersection, a short distance away from Lucius and Hermione.

Malfoy's attention had been successfully captured. Though Hermione could still not get away, at least she now had some time. Maybe the interloper would kill Malfoy. "Who are you?" Malfoy demanded as he studied the well matured man clad in black and white.

"I am the Count of Trazkaban." he announced in response to Malfoy's rude inquiry. "It shall be my pleasure to take the battle-leader as my trophy for this battle. I do not think that Lord Polairix will mind, though he's technically in command of this expedition."

"What do you mean?" Malfoy asked, clearly confused.

"Well," Count Trazkaban whispered conspiratorially and with great amusement, "Lord Polairix doesn't seem to be into the trophy collecting business."

Malfoy elected to end his conversation with the man who appeared to be unarmed and was not speaking much sense. "Desfie!" he yelled. A really nasty organ burster curse zoomed toward the Count who merely held up his gloved hand and absorbed it. Malfoy paled. "You're a sorcerer, aren't you?"

"What was your first guess?" Hiscophney asked, slightly offended that the battle-leader had not been able to identify him as a sorcerer from the reference to Trazkaban.

"Ava-!" yelled Malfoy, attempting to kill the sorcerer. However, Hiscophney was just too quick and lightning flew from his still-outstretched hand. The blue light wrapped around Malfoy and promptly took him to the ground, right in front of Hermione, leaving him stunned.

The Count of Trazkaban then lightly walked toward the fallen figure of Malfoy Sr. as a blade of black fire materialized in his hand. As he approached, he raised the blade above his ahead. What he did next caused Hermione to shriek in horror. She was still shrieking when Ron found her a half-hour later after the battle.

Harry quickly created several Portkeys to transport he, his bodyguards, and the Longbottoms to Nair'icaix. Though the mentally-challenged couple had proved difficult to manipulate into a good position for transportation, they had not put up too much resistance.

He handed the Portkey's to Nailoff who distributed them to those transporting the Longbottoms. They were then preparing to activate them when Lord Hiscophney addressed Harry through his ring. "The Death Eaters are either down, injured, or retreated, my lord. All the patients have been evacuated."

"Good." Harry told Hiscophney. "Thank you for the help. Leave the rest of the mess to the Order. I've got the Longbottoms with me."

"It was my pleasure." Hiscophney said before he signed off.

Harry nodded to the Ice guards and they activated the Portkeys. A wave of depression sought to overcome him as he looked at the soon to be empty ward. He desperately hoped that Bellatrix would be free to talk with him when they got back. He had at least expected his friends to listen to him.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Portkey promptly deposited the Ice soldiers, Harry, and the Longbottoms on the floor in the entrance hall at Nair'icaix. Harry quickly stood up from his fallen position and took in the surroundings. The large hall had been transformed into a gigantic hospital-wing. Nurses and Medi-wizards darted from bed to bed as they checked up on all of the patients.

Captain Nailoff promptly commandeered one of the nurses and instructed her to have the Longbottoms looked after. Before she scurried away, Harry also added his own instructions to have them taken to a room once they had been examined. Nailoff and his soldiers then dispersed to their own accommodations leaving Harry standing amid the bustle of the temporary hospital.

A glance at his watch revealed to Harry that it was nearly morning. Any decent wizard or witch would be getting some sleep right now. However, he was convinced that Dumbledore was getting ready to expel Neville and the two girls. He couldn't let that happen. With a sigh, he pulled his Ivory wand from his cloak and used it to Apparate to Hogwarts.

"Any of you could have been killed!" Dumbledore said to re-emphasize the main point in his lecture. "I realize that you are a very skilled wizard when it comes to Defense, Mr. Longbottom, but Miss Patil and Brown could have been severely injured. You had no right to place them in such danger."

Dumbledore's statement was followed with a loud 'harrumph' from both girls. "We knew the risks and I would gladly do the same again!" Parvati said, her voice bordering on the edge of absolute defiance toward the aged Headmaster.

"Me too!" Lavender added.

The three teens were then studied for several moments by Dumbledore before he spoke again. "That's what I'm afraid of. I can't have you three gallivanting off to wherever you want when I can't supervise you around the clock. I will have to take disciplinary action."

“They were Death Eaters!” Parvati wheedled. “You and the others needed all the help you could get.”

“You did not go to St. Mungos expecting to fight Death Eaters.” Dumbledore promptly rebutted as he drew several sheets of parchment from a drawer in his desk. “Even if those had been the circumstances, you would still be in violation of school rules.”

Lavender was looking distinctly nervous now that she and her cohorts could see that they were definitely in trouble. Ironic really. They had always expected that trouble would come from the existence of Potter’s Legion. “What are you going to do?”

“All three of you are too old and set in your ways for me to change you, so I have no choice but to expel you. It’s the best thing for all concerned.” Dumbledore said coolly.

Before Neville could say anything, another voice interrupted them. “That won’t be necessary, Albus.”

Dumbledore looked up in shock as the three teens spun in their chairs to find a somewhat bedraggled, yet very imperious Harry Potter standing in the open doorway of the Headmaster’s office. “What are you doing here, Harry?”

“That’s Mr. Potter or Lord Polairix to you.” Harry stated. He then waved his hand absently and grinned. “But that is irrelevant because I won’t ‘allow’ you to say anything. I’d rather get this over with so that I don’t waste any time while you explain why I should ‘give myself up’ or do any other idiotic things that you think might serve one of your schemes.”

Much to his chagrin, Dumbledore found himself unable to even open his mouth to speak. Apparently young Harry had outstripped him where magical power was concerned.

“In case you forgot, the House of Polairix owns and as of this coming summer, operates Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and

Wizardry." Harry began. "I don't have any authority as of now. You must realize though, that I will have absolute authority come summer. If you wish to remain Headmaster of this institution, you will NOT be expelling Neville, Parvati, or Lavender. Agreed?"

Neville bit back a grin as he watched Professor Dumbledore give a resigned nod and a look that asked Harry what his reasoning was. Dumbledore did not know, understand, or suspect the association between Harry and Neville.

"You won't be expelling them because from what I've heard about them, I think they have their priorities straight. Not only that, haven't you realized that Neville and his friends were the ones who fought back that attack during the last Hogsmeade weekend? It would be sheer idiocy to get rid of them." Harry explained, purposely leaving his other motivations out of the explanation. He doubted that anything could stop Dumbledore from expelling Neville if he found out about Potter's Legion "I think that is all."

The three teens and old man watched as Harry casually pulled a white wand from his dark robes and impossibly Apparated from the castle after waving his hand to restore Dumbledore's speech abilities.

"How did he do that?" Parvati gasped.

A very deep sigh was emitted from Dumbledore's lips. "He owns the castle and grounds. There must be some way that he is able to get through the wards. Perhaps a hereditary blood key." He then gave them each a piercing gaze, trying to pry their secrets from their heads before continuing. "It seems I can't take any action against you. Please be careful in the future however. You are dismissed."

The old man then watched as the three adventurers shuffled out of his office, vaguely wondering why Harry would go to so much trouble to keep them in school. Was there a connection?

When Harry returned to Nair'icaix, he found that the hustle and bustle had calmed down somewhat in his entrance hall and that all the patients seemed to be comfortably settled. A small team of nurses seemed to be on duty, seeing to the patients' needs and comfort.

Hopefully, he would be able to have them all transported back to Britain as soon as possible. The hospital had fortunately not sustained any serious damage.

Not seeing anyone he recognized, Harry slowly made his way up to the master suite. He entered the room to find Bellatrix reading a small book while sitting in a rocking chair that she had acquired a few days earlier.

As soon as she became aware of his presence, she put the book down on a table and jumped up with a concerned expression painted on her beautiful face. "No injuries?" she asked as she glided over to him and absently touched him as if making sure he wasn't hiding anything.

"Nothing physical." Harry said despondently.

Bellatrix frowned. "What do you mean, dear?"

Harry briefly explained his short confrontation with Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, and to some extent the Order. "I've never blamed them for believing me guilty based on the evidence they had." Harry concluded. "It's just that deep down, I expected that they would at least listen to my side of the story."

"They'll be forced to realize their mistake quite soon." Bellatrix predicted. "You're the Lord of Polairix. They can't shut you up forever."

"Doesn't mean I feel any better about it." Harry mumbled.

A cushioned table abruptly appeared next to where the couple was standing. Bellatrix walked over and patted it with a quirky grin. "Strip and get on the table, Harry." she instructed. "It's time for your massage and therapy session with Dr. Bella."

Harry eyed the table suspiciously. "Strip as in 'naked?' What if someone walks in?"

Bellatrix rolled her eyes and promptly conjured a fluffy white towel which she tossed into Harry's face. "You can cover yourself with that."

Section break

Hermione noisily vomited for the third time that night. Watching Malfoy Sr. have his head removed had instantly traumatized her. After Ron had helped calm her down, the image of the sorcerer using his blade to do the deed kept playing through her mind. She hoped Ron would forgive her for getting sick on his pants.

"Are you okay?" Ginny asked, knocking on the open door to the bathroom at Grimmauld Place. "Ron says that you're a bit under the weather."

"How did you get here?" Hermione asked as she glanced up at Ginny, unsteadily regained her feet, and pulled the lever on the magical toilet. "Isn't it a bit late?"

Ginny shook her head. "Early, you mean. It's nearly dawn. Professor Dumbledore thought that I might appreciate being able to visit everybody for a short while to see that they're okay. He brought me here with him. I'll be returning to Hogwarts after the emergency meeting."

"Right." Hermione said in what she hoped was a brisk sounding voice. She had nearly forgot about the meeting. "I'd better go and join them before they get started."

"I'll come with you." Ginny volunteered. The two teenage girls quickly fell in pace beside each other as they made their way down toward the kitchen where most meetings were held. "I heard that you saw Malfoy get beheaded. Who did it?"

Hermione fought down the rising sickness in her stomach before answering. "You heard correctly. The 'Count of Trazkaban' did it. I think he's a sorcerer."

"I've never heard of a sorcerer by that name. Where did he come from?" Ginny asked.

"I think he works for Harry." Hermione responded absently as they descended a flight of stairs.

Ginny stopped short on the bottom step. "Harry? What about him? Is there something that nobody is telling me?"

"I guess I shouldn't have said that." Hermione said as a blush tinged her cheeks. She then quickly explained to the younger girl about Harry's arrival at the battle and how the Count had been with Harry and deferring to him.

"Evil attracts evil." Ginny said, trying to imitate a wise sage. "I honestly didn't think that Harry would work for Voldemort, but I'm not surprised that he's out there for himself."

Although Hermione agreed with Ginny, she still couldn't help but feel uncomfortable at their newest analysis of Harry's personality. Some of the things that Malfoy had said bothered her, but she decided to think about it later once they arrived at the kitchen's entrance.

She bid Ginny farewell as she entered the room the Order had deigned as its meeting place. Although she and Ron had been allowed to join up, Mrs. Weasley had adamantly insisted that her only daughter be excluded from the select group. Hermione smiled fondly at the matron who was now engaged in a heated discussion.

"It's unwise to provoke people, Ron! If what you say about that fire curse is true, Harry is extremely powerful, not to mention being the Lord of Polairix. I can't understand why Dumbledore would even let you try to confront that murderer."

"It was only Harry, Mum." Ron said, rolling his eyes.

Mrs. Weasley was ready to retort when Dumbledore, Moody, and Shacklebolt entered the kitchen from the hall. The auror was just

concluding some sort of status report to Dumbledore. “Overall, nobody was able to turn anything up.”

“What up?” Mrs. Weasley demanded. “Don’t tell me that you didn’t even come close to catching Potter!”

Moody grinned at her. “I won’t then.”

“My main concern is the disappearance of all the patients that were in St. Mungos.” Kingsley stated as several more Order members filed in to the table. “I hope that they turn up and that the Longbottoms are with them.”

The old Headmaster frowned. “I wish that I had been able to ask Harry about that when he visited me a couple of hours ago.”

Everyone in the room went silent as he voiced his wish and stared at him. “You saw Harry after the attack?” Hermione half-asked, half-stated.

“Yes, Miss Granger. I did.” Dumbledore replied as he gestured for everyone to take their places around the table and took his own. “Mr. Potter, or as we could say, Lord Polairix, paid me a visit at Hogwarts. He told me that I would lose my position as Headmaster if I expelled your fellow classmates.”

“Did he say anything else?” Ron inquired eagerly. “Were you able to talk to him some more?”

Dumbledore shook his head sadly. “He would not let me talk to him. After telling me what I wasn’t going to do, he promptly left.” He deliberately left out that part about how Harry had Apparated through the Hogwarts wards. There was no reason to make them worried right now.

“How can he just walk in and do that?” Mrs. Weasley demanded, horrified at what Harry was able to do.

“He owns Hogwarts.” Snape said snidely as he made a tardy appearance. “My apologies, Albus. I was unable to get away from the Dark lord until just now.” The potion’s master then took a seat.

Albus shook his head. “That’s beside the point right now. There is nothing we can do about that. Our immediate concerns at this point in time are for the missing patients, and the Longbottoms. Not all of you understand the Longbottoms importance, so I’ll briefly explain. Whoever has them might be able to use them to gain some sort of power if they were to make a recovery. Before the battle, they were noted to be making progress.”

“I take it that’s the reason You-Know-Who attacked St. Mungos.” Arthur Weasley observed dryly.

“That’s not quite accurate.” Snape cut in. “The Dark Lord merely wanted the Longbottoms dead. Unfortunately for him, it doesn’t seem like that is going to happen anytime soon.”

Tonks grinned. “I guess Harry has more brains than you people would like to admit. Instead of seeing potential power as a threat, he chose to turn it into an opportunity. Let’s worry about getting the patients to a safe place. Does anyone know where they are?”

“As I was just telling Albus, the Ministry has been unable to locate any of the patients or Harry’s followers. Our tracking devices were unable to sense the magic that those sorcerers employed during the attack.” Kingsley Shacklebolt explained to everyone.

The meeting continued on as everyone put forth their mostly useless ideas as how to recover the patients and save the Longbottoms. Finally, the subject that all those present had been avoiding was brought up by Ron. “This is getting us nowhere! We can’t solve the ‘missing patients’ or ‘Longbottom’ problem right now. Let’s move onto worrying about imminent threats. Potter for instance.”

Everyone was silent as they carefully avoided eye contact with each other. The silence was shattered when Hermione spoke up timidly. “He helped us against the Death Eaters.”

“ Only so he could take the Longbottoms away!” Ron yelled unnecessarily.

“Shut up!” Snape hissed at Ron. He then addressed everyone present. “All right. Everyone here knows by now that Potter is the Lord of Polairix and consequently, the Earl of the North. Since his escape from Azkaban, Potter has taken a firm stance against the Ministry using his inherited position and immense magical power. Name something bad that he has done.”

Glances were exchanged as everyone realized that after a month or so of freedom, Harry had yet to harm anyone. What little progress Snape had accomplished was ruined when Molly Weasley stood up. “He’s tipped his hand now, hasn’t he? There’s no longer any reason for him not to do anything. Mark my words! People will be killed now, and it won’t be the Death Eaters doing the killings. Assuming that he’s hiding in the North, his followers will come begin a reign of terror.”

Snape struggled mightily to control the seething bubble of anger that rose and threatened to engulf his normally cool mind. He stoop up abruptly. “If you’ll all forgive me, there are things that I must attend to.” He then left the room, nodding discreetly to Tonks and Moody.

“ Maybe he’s right.” wheezed old Mundungus Fletcher, briefly drawing himself out of his habitual drunken stupor.

“Oh, shut up!” Mrs. Weasley commanded as she looked in the general direction of Dumbledore, not quite meeting his blue-eyed gaze. “Something will have to be done. The public must be warned that Harry James Potter is armed, dangerous, and ready to kill as are his followers who have yet to be solidly identified or named. They still don’t even know about what he did over the Christmas holidays.”

“It seems to me that the Daily Prophet has been saying that for nearly two years.” Tonks declared, trying to make the whole thing sound ludicrous.

The young Auror's efforts failed however. Dumbledore nodded. "We'll have to come up with some way to let everyone know."

"What's wrong with the Daily Prophet?" Ron asked readily.

Dumbledore coughed nervously. "I believe that Harry owns it."

"Huh?" Ron exclaimed. "What do you mean?"

"For the past several weeks, the House of Polairix has been purchasing a great deal of stock and ownership in companies. As of several weeks ago, the House of Polairix purchased complete control of the newspaper. Which reminds me Kingsley . . ."

"Yes?"

"The Ministry will only be able to look into the missing patients situation from a possible kidnapping standpoint. Meaning, that you can't do anything for twenty-four hours. Harry owns controlling shares in the hospital." Dumbledore announced. "That means that you have to have his permission to start investigating who took who from the hospital before the twenty-four hours is up."

Hermione blinked. Since when did Harry have so much money and financial sense? Was Bellatrix Black, who had escaped Azkaban the same night he had done so, helping him? Or was it someone else? She ignored that questions and spoke up. "We'll worry about informing the public of the danger then. Patients of St. Mungos can come later." she said, hoping to head off another heated discussion.

"Perhaps we could get an article in the Quibbler." Ron mused. "Luna was certainly helpful enough last year."

"Helpful to Harry." Hermione reminded him. "I don't think that it would work. She's been slightly distant toward us this year."

"There's the Wizarding Wireless Network." Mrs. Weasley informed everyone. "Everyone listens to that all the time."

Dumbledore nodded. "It's settled then. We'll send messages about Harry over the WWN." He then looked at Ron and Hermione. "You two were his friends, so you'll be more convincing. Would you two consent to making a message for us to use?"

Ron and Hermione both nodded, not realizing how much they would come regret agreeing to the proposition.

"Good." Dumbledore smiled. He then stood up and looked at everyone. "This meeting is adjourned. I will be inviting a select few of you to a special meeting at a later date in order to discuss the ramifications of Harry's succession to the Seat of the North."

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Maybe they’re right.” Harry mumbled, barely able to talk through the waves of relaxation and pleasure that Bellatrix’s nimble fingers were effectively sending through his body. “What would my mum think of me? Have I dishonored her memory?”

Bellatrix snorted, but did not stop the massage. “Have you done anything wrong? Like kill innocent people? Have you stolen money? Have you told lies about your friends?”

“No.”

“Then you have nothing to be ashamed of, Harry.”

A smile crossed Harry’s face as he enjoyed his special treatment. Bellatrix had effectively drawn out the stiffness in his body as she drew out his emotional pains. Deep down, he had known all along that he was doing the right thing and that everything Dumbledore, Ron, and Hermione had said were hogwash, but it felt better knowing that someone he cared about agreed with him.

“That’s it. All done.” Bellatrix announced.

Harry overcame the urge to fall asleep on the massage table that she had conjured using the House-Sprite magic and stood up, wrapping the towel around him securely. “Thank you.” he said gratefully. “How much do I owe you?”

“Well . . .” she said, grinning mischievously, “you can give me a massage when-”

The door to their suite opened and Tess walked in holding a small radio. “I’m sorry to interrupt, my lord, lady, but I think that you should hear this.” she announced grimly. The radio was set down and Harry’s assistant twiddled with the knobs a bit before the signal came through loud and clear.

“. . . and for those of you just joining us, we have some very critical and breaking news.” the announcer said in a serious voice that barely hid his own excitement at being the one to help proclaim a big news story to the public. Harry and Bellatrix glanced at each other nervously. It couldn’t be good.

“In a shocking report released by the Ministry of Magic, it is revealed that during the Christmas holiday and while home with his aunt and uncle, Harry James Potter- The Boy Who Lived- was arrested and convicted of the mass murder of Muggles living on his home street of Privet Drive in Surrey. Even more shocking is the fact that Potter and another prisoner, Bellatrix Black, escaped Azkaban shortly after his imprisonment on the island.”

Harry growled as his hackles rose, but he stopped when Bellatrix laid a calming hand on his arm.

“After his escape, the Ministry believed that Potter and possibly Black- formerly Lestrange, intended to flee to another country and forget about Britain. However, significant evidence suggests that Potter masterminded the attack on St. Mungo’s hospital that has left all of its patients missing.”

“We’d better see to getting them back.” Bellatrix sighed and looked at Tess who signaled that she would see to it as soon as possible while Harry muttered about people too blind to see Death Eaters running amok.

The broadcast continued. “Due to the fact that Potter was unmasked at the hospital attack, law-enforcement officials believe that he no longer intends to play his hand from behind the scenes. The public is warned that Harry James Potter is armed with a wand and is dangerous. Any sightings of him are to be reported immediately. Watchers are also advised that Potter has a small army of followers who are very proficient in magic. No one should approach them if they are spotted. The public is also advised to watch for Bellatrix Black. She is an escaped prisoner and likely in cahoots with Potter.”

"It's not as bad as it could be." Harry said, trying to put on a brave face. "Not everyone believes everything the Ministry tells them, especially after the whole coverup on Voldemort when I was in fifth-year." Bellatrix only nodded silently.

After the announcer went on to detail instructions for contacting the authorities if 'The Boy Who Killed' was spotted, the program continued. "We have right here statements from Potter's closest friends at Hogwarts. Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger."

"Harry has become very twisted and evil." crackled Hermione's recorded voice. "His mind no longer functions properly. Everything is twisted in his perception. If you do see him, do not let him sweet-talk you. He will manipulate you and will say anything to achieve his purposes."

Harry's mouth dropped open and before he could let out an exclamation, Ron's voice followed.

"The only thing he wants is money and power. He will kill, rob, and intimidate to get it. Don't let him get away with it."

"How dare he?" Harry shouted angrily as both Bellatrix and Tess cringed.

Bellatrix quickly placed both her hands on his arms and looked him directly in the eye. "You know as well as I that getting angry will not solve anything, Harry. We must formulate a plan of action. I am fairly sure that this can all be countered with tomorrow's Daily Prophet. We can even have some free copies distributed to non-subscribers."

Harry nodded and waved his hand to dismiss Tess so that she could return to her normal duties and see to arrange for the evacuated patients to be returned to St. Mungo's which had been declared suitable for their return. "I guess that you're right."

Draco Malfoy quailed as the Dark lord strode into the small room. He had received an emergency signal early in the morning that indicated he should immediately leave Hogwarts and make his way to the

secret cabin that his family had always relied on for refuge from the Ministry.

He quickly bowed to Voldemort who had stopped and was now observing him as a Death Eater, Wormtail, entered the room in a very servile manner. "What is it, my lord?"

"Your father met his end in battle last night, child." Voldemort said neutrally, showing no sympathy, remorse, or joy at the fact. "He fought for our most noble cause and fell honorably. He will always be remembered."

A flood of emotions shot through Draco's cold veins. Mostly hate and fear. Had he loved his father? Maybe. It didn't matter. Pride and honor dictated that he should seek revenge, especially for an offense against the Malfoy name. "Who killed him?" he growled, all while showing Voldemort the proper respect.

"The Count of Trazkaban who was acting on the orders of Harry Potter." Voldemort stated.

"What do you mean?" Draco whispered in shock.

Voldemort briefly informed Draco of the exact events of the battle to the best of his knowledge. It wasn't out of courtesy to the deceased offspring however. It was for his own purposes. "Potter has become the Lord of Polairix and is responsible for your father's death. If you come with me, I can help you get revenge."

"Wouldn't it be better for me to stay at Hogwarts and go on as normal? It would be good to have someone on the inside if you know what I mean, my lord."

"There are others." Voldemort stated in a dismissive manner. "You could be useful though, and at this point I must use you or lose you."

"What do you mean?"

Voldemort twisted his lips in what could best be described as a scowl. "Your mother's actions have complicated things and your father's death has made them worse. None of your Malfoy relatives have legal standing at this point in time. Harry Potter, who is now the Head of House Black could easily take you into custody if he was so inclined. That old fool at Hogwarts could certainly think up of something to keep his claws in you."

"So I have to escape before anything happens?" Malfoy said, completing Voldemort's thought.

"Yes."

Draco nodded and pointlessly considered Voldemort's proposal. There was obviously no other choice in the matter. There was one question though. "You said that Potter is the Lord of Polairix, that could turn the tide in this war against us if the Ministry allies with us. How will you prevent that?"

"You will find out shortly." Voldemort sneered. "I'll see to Potter's further ostracization. In fact, the wheels are in motion as I speak.

"These two are here because they are Harry's former friends." Dumbledore said to Snape, Kingsley, Arthur Weasley, and Professor McGonagall, in order to validate Ron and Hermione's presence at the small meeting at Hogwarts.

Snape rolled his eyes. "If you say so."

Dumbledore ignored Snape's caustic mood. It was probably a side effect of the events he had been involved with for the past twenty-four hours. "Harry is the Earl of the North and that means he now has great power. Enough power to destroy Voldemort, or us. Maybe even both. We must make plans to deal with this situation."

"Well, we could always manipulate him so that we can force him to blindly do what you want him to do." Snape suggested idly.

“Severus!” McGonagall said tersely. “We realize that you aren’t feeling well, but could you please keep your comments to yourself?”

Arthur leaned forward and spoke to everyone in his most convincing voice. “I think that we should attempt to reason with him. Listen to his story, tell him ours, and then make some sort of compromise that at least gets You-Know-Who out of the way.”

“We already tried that, Mr. Weasley.” Hermione said practically. “He won’t listen to us.”

“We can hunt him down and attack him!” Ron declared. “Then we can worry about You-Know-Who.”

Kingsley shook his head negatively. “You should have enough sense to realize that wouldn’t work, Ronald. One, we don’t even know where he is. Two, the Ministry isn’t strong enough to adequately face those sorcerers, and three- we have no formal grounds on which we can accuse him of any crime thus far.”

“Attack his influence.” McGonagall said dryly. “It’s easier to fight an enemy if he can’t affect you on the inside. His control of the Daily Prophet is a problem. In fact, his money is a problem.”

“Only for Death Eaters thus far.” Snape added.

“I think you may be right, Minerva.” Dumbledore commented. “I have a meeting with the Minister of Magic scheduled. I should probably depart now to be on time. This meeting is dismissed.”

Andy Cargney studied the final version of the next morning’s edition of the Daily Prophet. It seemed rather strange to have the final draft ready so early in the day. However, the owner of the paper had specifically provided all the content for the next morning’s paper.

He looked up at his assistant. “This looks perfect, Willy. I guess we can run it.”

Willy nodded and took the copy back. “Yes, I guess we can. It sure seems odd to be defending Harry Potter and accusing the Ministry of

corruption while the Wireless Network accuses him of high crimes and misdemeanors.”

“We don’t have much choice.” Andy replied dryly. “I don’t care. It’s just the business. Besides, I’m not so sure that the WWN has their information right anyway.”

“Oh?”

Willy was about to ask what his boss meant when an explosion rocked the Prophet building and all the windows that looked out to Diagon Alley shattered inward. All the staff members screamed and dove for their desks, fully expecting the Dark lord himself to appear and begin shooting of Killing Curses.

However, this belief was contradicted when the dust settled and they found the room filled with Aurors holding drawn wands and aiming them at anything that moved. They were all further shocked when Percival Weasley, one of the Minister of Magic’s top aides entered the building.

With an arrogant flourish, Percy Weasley withdrew an official piece of parchment from his cloak and began to read in a pompous voice. “Be it known to all that on the grounds that Harry James Potter, the Lord of Polairix is guilty of high treason against the British Ministry of Magic, all of his commercial property and money is hereby forfeited to the Ministry. By command of the Minister of Magic, the Daily Prophet is to be shut down and the press and all copies of the Daily Prophet are to be burned.”

“You can’t do that!” Andy screamed defiantly, more out of loyalty to the paper rather than to Harry Potter.

“I just did.” Percy said smugly.

“Fudge had all his property seized?” Snape asked in shock. “What about Hogwarts?”

Tonks fidgeted uncomfortably. "Dumbledore and Fudge decided that having Hogwarts seized could result in some serious repercussions. The school was turned over to the House of Polairix too long ago to be sure that there aren't any enchantments that could come back and hurt Dumbledore and the Ministry."

"He isn't going to be happy about this." Snape muttered. "What about Gringotts? Have they gotten his money from there?"

"I don't know." Tonks said helplessly. "I sent a letter to Nair'icaix as soon as I heard the word, but there isn't a single thing that Harry can do."

Snape sighed. "We can pray that it doesn't get any worse."

"Take me to whoever is in charge." Percy snapped at the first goblin he and the Aurors encountered as they entered Gringotts. "I'm here on important Ministry business."

The goblin looked at Percy grimly before moving away quickly. When he returned, he motioned for them to follow him. The pompous Weasley smugly rehearsed what he was going to say as he briskly followed the creature that was leading him to the manager's office.

The goblin motioned for Percy and the Aurors to enter a large office and gestured to a very regal looking goblin seated behind a desk. "You may speak with Lord Gold." The goblin then left the room.

Percy approached the large desk that Lord Gold sat behind and then withdrew a document addressed to the chief goblin at Gringotts. He tossed the parchment down in front of the goblin. "You must comply with that order from Minister Fudge immediately."

"I'm not sure that I have to do anything." Lord Gold replied irritably. "What is the meaning of this? You have no right to just show up and demand an audience with me."

"Read the parchment and see." Percy snapped.

Lord Gold reached forward and picked the document up, treating it as if it had come from the depths of a sewer. The goblin shot an angry glance at Percy before reading it.

To Whom It May Concern:

By decree of the Minister of Magic, Gringotts Bank is to immediately turn over all assets belonging to Harry James Potter, the House of Polairix, the House of Potter, and the House of Black to the British Ministry of Magic on grounds that Harry James Potter is guilty of high treason against the aforementioned Ministry.

Gringotts must also swear to never deal with Mr. Potter's assets or accept his patronage in the future. Gringotts must also in no way give aid to Mr. Potter.

Cornelius Oswald Fudge

Minister of Magic

"Tell me, young pup. Do you have any idea as to how many treaties this 'thing' breaks? Does your moronic boss have any idea what a serious action this is?" Lord Gold whispered.

"Minister Fudge is well aware of all things." Percy stated. "In fact, he's aware of the fact that we're at war and that Harry Potter could be a potential threat."

Lord Gold smiled grimly. "A threat to Minister Fudge, certainly not the wizarding world."

"You don't know what you're talking about!" Percy retorted.

"I think I do, boy." Gold said, his voice showing nothing but contempt for Percy Weasley and his superior at the Ministry. "What happens if I should refuse to comply with this demand?"

Percy gestured toward the Aurors standing behind him. "That's what my escort is for. You can either turn over Potter's assets or be arrested for treason. Take your pick, goblin."

The goblin smiled evilly at Percy. "I will do neither. Gringotts Bank hereby refuses to comply with your Ministry's wishes." Lord Gold then raised his hand and snapped. Immediately, the walls enclosing the office seemed to fall away to reveal a squadron of heavily armed goblins training their weapons as Percy and the Aurors. "I suggest that you Apparate back to the Ministry."

"You won't get away with this." Percy growled as he fearfully drew his wand and Apparated away, the Aurors quickly following suit.

The Head of Gringotts was immediately joined by his compatriots, Lord Silverve and Bronze. "Have the staff begin to evacuate our records immediately. See to it that access to the vaults is blocked off from this building. I'll go to the lobby and order all humans to leave and notify Lord Polairix of the situation immediately."

Lord Silver and Bronze didn't waste any time departing to see to their individual tasks. Lord Gold smiled grimly and restored the illusion of walls around his office before making his way to the lobby of the bank. He stepped onto a special platform that immediately lifted off and hovered above the crowd of witches and wizards doing business.

The goblin's voice was automatically amplified as a result of a special charm on the platform. "Attention all Gringott's patrons. The British Ministry of Magic has blatantly broken its treaties with this establishment. Therefore, Gringotts of Britain is hereby closed until further notice. All those present may withdraw up to 500 Galleons from an available teller and have it credited away from their account. Those who don't take this opportunity will receive either twenty percent of their current deposit or 500 Galleons by owl."

"What has happened?" called out an anxious witch. The crowd fell silent in order to hear the goblin's response. "How long will this closure last?

“Ask your Minister of Magic.” Lord Gold answered.

Chapter 24

“They did WHAT?” screamed Fudge as he leapt up from his desk and began to pace in front of the large fireplace that dominated his office. “They’re goblins! What makes them think that they can just shut down like that? Don’t they understand that we’re at war?”

“Lord Gold doesn’t seem to care about current events, just his treaties.” Percy stated.

Fudge scowled angrily. “They’re OUR treaties, not his. We can do what we want with them.” He returned to his desk and pounded his fist on it. “Didn’t you explain that to him?”

“I didn’t really have the opportunity.” Percy gulped.

“Get out of here!” Fudge shouted. “You’re a pathetic failure to me. If I had sent someone else, we wouldn’t be having this problem now! I want that report on Potter’s assets on my desk early tomorrow too.”

Percy quickly left the office, leaving Fudge to his tirade. He would calm down in an hour or so. He always did. Then after that, he would go and do something else sure to bring him back to his angry state.

“I take it that the news didn’t go over well.” a fellow assistant said from his desk as Percy sat at his own.

“It did not.” Percy sighed. “I hope I’m not around when he realizes that the economy is in big trouble now. Fudge will have to seize almost all of the commercial business establishments and force them to work at this point.”

A deep sigh came from his fellow worker. “And then the next thing we know, we’ll all be bloody Communists.”

“Whatever.” Percy mumbled as he waved an anxious looking Auror through to the Minister’s office. If Fudge didn’t want visitors, that was his problem for now.

“What will this do to the economy, Lord Silver?” Harry inquired as he struggled to retain his calm composure. How could Fudge do this to him? What had he ever done to deserve all this persecution? Didn’t the idiot realize that he was only hurting Britain and not Harry?

The quiet but shrewd goblin steepled his fingers thoughtfully. “The British money supply has just taken a significant drop, obviously. If the Minister is wise, he will take action that will promote immediate deflation. That will be very beneficial to you. Whether or not he promotes it, it will eventually happen.

Harry nodded. It seemed that the closure of Gringotts would not be overly catastrophic for the average wizard or witch and their family. The situation would be very comparable to the Great Depression however. Then the war would come, just like before. “How long until this closure starts hurting the goblins?”

The goblin seemed surprised that Harry would be concerned for his race’s welfare so it took a moment before he answered. “The treaties with Britain call for the violator of the other treaties in place to cover expenses. The goblins can therefore keep the bank closed almost indefinitely since we’re not the ones paying for the loss.”

“I wonder if Fudge realizes that?” Harry asked himself. “Will the bank still be open to me?”

“Of course.” Lord Silver said, waving his hand in a dismissive manner. “We’ll still strive to work with you and your accounts, despite the difficulties caused by the Ministry. North Gringotts will also still be able to function for you as well. With time, we may be able to open Gringotts in a type of safe mode. Your strength in magical power could perhaps help us in that respect.”

Harry smiled. “That’s some good news at least. Thank you for coming to brief me on the situation Lord Silver. If there is anything at all that I can do to help you, let me know.”

The goblin nodded and stood up as Harry did. "Briefing you was the least we could, Lord Polairix. If anything significant happens with regard to your account or assets, we'll contact you immediately. Also, thank you for your offer." Then, wasting no time, the goblin magicked himself away from Nair'icaix.

Letting out an exhausted sigh, Harry fell back into his chair and slumped back. Could things get any worse? The Daily Prophet was gone and Fudge had made it practically impossible to deal with the British economy, not by cutting off his resources, but by ruining the economy in general.

The door to his private study opened to admit Bellatrix, Tess, Bess, and Reggins- his ghostly secretary. He looked at them hopefully. "Any new plans to solve all my problems with one easy step?"

"I'm afraid not." Reggins said dryly.

"Great."

Bellatrix approached the desk and laid a calming hand on his shoulder. "Don't let it get to you, Harry. We'll figure something out eventually."

Several overstuffed chairs appeared for all but the ghost to take a seat in. Tess wasted no time in getting down to business. "Your first and probably foremost loss is the Daily Prophet. The Ministry has seized that, so there is no way to simply start a new paper for the same subscribers. It will likely be impossible to even print a newspaper in Britain unless you're the Ministry from here on out."

"Is there a way to print a newspaper outside of the country and then send it in to everyone?" Harry inquired thoughtfully, his mental facilities rising to the challenge.

"That is a remote possibility, my lord." Tess replied. "The newspapers still have to be distributed and doing so from even a country as close as the North or France would be too difficult. There are also legal challenges in other countries that must be overcome."

Harry nodded. "True."

"There's always the Quibbler." Bellatrix suggested, remembering about how Harry had gotten his story out in his fifth-year at Hogwarts.

"I don't want to create any trouble for the Lovegood family." Harry sighed. "Knowing Fudge, if there was even a hint that I might be trying to work with them, they'd be shut down before their press even started printing."

"How about WWN? Could you buy it?" Bess asked.

Before Harry could respond, Bellatrix shot the idea down. "I'm afraid that it is impossible. The Ministry has always owned that medium and controlled it rigidly. The Dark Lord has tried to acquire it for himself many times and has always failed."

There was a silence as they all considered the stalemate that they had come to in their discussion. It did not appear that there was any way to fix the Daily Prophet problem. Harry revived the discussion. "What about my financial dealings in Britain?"

Bess shrugged. "We can just set up a false name and deal under that for you. If you're not inclined to do that, then perhaps you can ask some of your followers to use their names for your behalf."

"Seems fair enough." Harry answered, slowly considering both options. Maybe a combination of both would be effective. He yawned and glanced out one of the windows. The sun had just barely gone down and he was already tired. Pathetic. Perhaps there was a way that he could build up his stamina. He would have to ask some of his bodyguards if they could provide some guidance.

A brief knock sounded on the door and it opened to admit Count Hiscophney. "I'm sorry to disturb you, my lord. It has come to my attention that a small Muggle village located on the north coast of Britain is under attack from Voldemort's forces. I believe he intends to decimate them."

Harry frowned worriedly. "How did you find this out?"

"I have always had lookouts stations on the north coast of that country for safety reasons." Hiscophney answered. "Coincidentally, Voldemort has attacked a village in which one of my agents made his home at."

"I'll have to do something." Harry decided out loud. "Assemble a strike team to go with me to the village. If we hurry we can still save a few people."

Hiscophney grinned. "I've already taken the liberty to do so, my lord. Your bodyguards are also waiting."

Harry stood up and unconsciously summoned his black breastplate and battle robes lined with silver. "That was very efficient of you. Send one of Nailoff's men to fetch Narcissa Black and have her appropriately clothed for an outing of this nature." He turned to Bellatrix. "Would you like to come as well?"

Bellatrix wasted no time in answering. "Of course! If I can help it, I'm not going to let you go into a dangerous area alone."

"Good." Harry said as he watched Bellatrix quickly summon her own armor. He turned to Bess and Tess. "You might as well prepare to deal with any injuries that need minor care. I'll contact Xerina and have her send a couple of doctors."

"Yes, my lord." they said, echoing each other.

The two personal assistants then left the room as Hiscophney's men entered, soon followed by the Ice soldiers, and then a pair of Ice soldiers bodily dragging a very disgruntled Narcissa with them. "She didn't want to come." one of them explained to Harry as they let her go and watched as she narrowly missed falling on the floor.

"She doesn't have a choice." Harry commented as he quickly used his powers to peek into her mind and confirm that her attitude toward

him and everything else remained the same. Perhaps this little field trip would change things a little. At the very least, it would get her attention.

Narcissa, who seemed to understand this fact, did not say anything but contented herself to scowl in Harry's general direction. Harry decided to address her directly. "A muggle village is under attack, Narcissa. I'm taking you with me so that you can see what you seem to believe in firsthand."

Harry stepped forward and firmly grasped Narcissa by the elbow. "You'll stay with me so that I can keep you safe and prevent you from running off and causing trouble." He nodded to Hiscophney, Nailoff, and of course- Bellatrix. "Let's go."

Ron, Hermione, Snape, and McGonagall were once again convened in Dumbledore's office with the Headmaster. Kingsley and Mr. Weasley, who had been present at the meeting earlier that day, were missing. Dumbledore had already informed them that Mr. Weasley was unable to come and that Kingsley was quite tardy.

"Perhaps we can start without Auror Shacklebolt," Snape suggested unhappily. "There are things that I need to do and wasting my time in useless meetings is not one of them."

"We should probably start." McGonagall stated logically. "I'm sure that he can be brought up to speed as soon as he arrives."

Hermione frowned as she mentally reviewed the events of the day. Closing down the Daily Prophet had been a very intelligent thing to do, she reckoned. Trying to seize Harry's money was also a good idea turned bad. There had been enough goblin rebellions in the past, but never over whether or not the bank should allow the Ministry to seize the funds of a witch or wizard. "I don't get it." she voiced finally. "Why did Gringotts close?"

"That was a very unpredictable move on their part, wasn't it?" Dumbledore mused. "It is quite possible that young Percy's attitude toward them insulted them. He's a bit stuck up, but I wouldn't expect

a goblin to react so adversely. There's also another possibility, one that I hope is not the case."

Snape gave everyone present a dose of his trademark sneer. "What could that possibility be, Headmaster?"

"Well," Dumbledore said slowly, "it could be that the goblins are allied with Harry."

"What!" Ron exclaimed. "Why?"

He received no answer because Kingsley Shacklebolt burst into the office panting. "The Ministry received an anonymous tip that a Muggle village on the north coast is under attack by an unidentified group of wizards. Scouts were immediately sent to confirm the report. One of them returned and is barely alive."

"Death Eaters?" Hermione asked.

Kingsley shook his head. "No. There is no Dark Mark and all of the attackers are wearing gray."

Professor Dumbledore's face grew grim. "It seems that Harry is letting us know what he thinks about our actions against him today."

Harry used his above average powers to magically transport himself, Bellatrix, Narcissa, and two of his bodyguards to a specified location in the besieged village from the hill outside of town where he and Hiscophney had quickly formulated a plan of action.

"There's something wrong about this picture." Bellatrix announced as she held one of her cherry wands in front of her, ready to fire a curse at anything that posed a threat. "The Death Eaters should be wearing dark cloaks with masks, not gray cloaks with no masks."

"Camouflage?" Harry hypothesized.

"Maybe." Bellatrix said, her voice reflecting her lack of assurance.

An explosion shook the ground and several random curses exploded only a few feet away from where the small group stood. In the confusion, Harry heard Narcissa scream and try to run for cover. However, she was prevented by his firm grip around her elbow.

"Let me go!" she demanded. "You can't make me go through this mess!"

"You and other like-minded pure-bloods seem to think that it's okay to put innocent Muggles through this." Harry commented dryly as he slowly turned and scanned the area, holding his Black Ash wand out as if it could stop anything from coming his way. "Let's go this way. It seems that all the Death Eaters are further in. Hiscophney and Nailoff should be driving the Death Eaters on their sides toward the center of the village."

Narcissa did not reply to Harry's bland barb, but did follow her sister and brother-in-law's bodyguards as they slowly made their way to the center of the village. The others seemed to concentrate on what lay ahead. However, Narcissa couldn't help but observe the occasional corpse laying mangled in the street.

She thought that she could never see anything worse than those corpses. Much to her horror, she found that she was wrong as they passed a corpse that wasn't quite dead yet. "Can't you do anything for him?" she asked Harry.

He shook his head. "There's nothing that can stop him from dying, I can feel it. It's my duty to care for those who have a chance."

There was nothing for Narcissa to do but nod in acceptance and try to steel her nerves as she felt herself sink into a mental state of shock. After several minutes of walking to the center of the village, they were all surprised when a small girl abruptly dashed out from between two houses farther up the street.

Before any of the group could call out to her, a Reducto curse flew from behind her and hit her dead on, ripping her to shreds before their eyes. Narcissa fell to her knees and vomited violently, only

vaguely aware as Harry rushed forward, his bodyguards on his heels, and shot a counter-curse on the dead child's behalf. From his angry exclamation, Narcissa assumed that he had missed.

"Are you okay?" Bellatrix asked sympathetically.

"Not really." Narcissa replied gratefully, glad to know that her sister still cared for her, despite her change of allegiance. "I don't suppose you could convince your husband to let me just go back to your fortress.

Bellatrix shrugged. "He won't, and even if he would- medicine doesn't always taste good."

Narcissa sighed as Bellatrix helped her to regain her standing position and as they made their way forward to join Harry who had already began to slowly make his way further toward the center.

When they arrived, they found the Death Eaters packed into the village square, all of them facing outward and maintaining a complicated compound shield charm that was proving very effective against the Ice soldiers and Trazkabanian sorcerers who had already attained the village square.

Much to everyone's shock, they spied Voldemort standing on a raised platform in the Death Eater's midst. When he spotted Harry he held up his hand signaling for everyone to pause in their fighting momentarily. "So nice to see you, Harry. Or is it Lord Polairix?" Voldemort hissed quietly, but still making his words heard by all.

"Call me what you wish, Voldemort." Harry scowled defiantly. "Why are you here? What's the purpose?"

Voldemort grinned. "Well dear fellow, you'll find out shortly." The Dark lord then signaled and the Death Eaters threw several small objects similar to Muggle hand grenades into the midst of Harry's followers.

"They're spell capsules," Bellatrix muttered to Harry quickly, "but don't worry. There are very few spells that are compatible with them, none of them harmful or deadly."

Before Harry could ask what their purpose could possibly be in a battle, they exploded, bombarding everyone present with a spell that Harry could not accurately identify. When the spells died down, Harry quickly checked all of his followers for injuries.

There were none. Instead, their cloaks had all been transfigured into a dark shade of gray. Harry looked down and saw that he had been affected the same way. His cloak was gray, all traces of black and silver gone, except for his breastplate. "What was that for?" Harry demanded, looking at Voldemort for answer.

"Take a wild guess." Voldemort replied, smiling evilly. "I'd stick around, but there's things I have to do." He pulled a black pocket watch from the folds of his cloak and looked at it before holding up his wand. "Cheerio!"

A brilliant flash of red light blinded everyone and when Harry was able to clear his eyes, he quickly observed that Voldemort and all of his Death Eaters were no longer present. "I don't understand what just happened." Harry said blankly.

His statement of confusion was abruptly punctuated by the popping sound associated with Apparition as Kingsley Shacklebolt, Professor Dumbledore, Ron, Hermione, Professor McGonagall, and an entire squadron of Aurors arrived.

The new arrivals all shot silent and appalled looks at the carnage that Voldemort and his Death Eaters left behind as Harry and his forces stood speechless, realizing what Voldemort had just done to them. They had been framed. Harry was particularly mad, this being his second time being framed.

Kingsley Shacklebolt grimly turned his attention to Harry. "You may be the Lord of Polairix, but as Harry James Potter, you are still a

subject of the United Kingdom and therefore subject to our laws. As the senior Ministry Auror present, I hereby demand that you surrender yourself for arrest on the charges of mass murder."

"I am innocent of all crimes you accuse me of." Harry said slowly as he tried to formulate a way in which he could explain this away. "What you see here is Voldemort's doing. We arrived to defend the Muggles and as soon as we cornered the Death Eaters, they escaped."

Shacklebolt's response was cut off as Ron pressed his way forward with Hermione on his tail. "Of course you're innocent. You're only standing over a zillion corpses with the blood practically dripping off your hands."

"I just explained everything to you!" Harry said desperately. "Give me the benefit of the doubt would you?"

"I can't do that." Shacklebolt said grimly as he pointed his wand at Harry, the Aurors under his command doing the same to him and his followers. "I'm under strict orders. Besides, you are still an escaped fugitive."

For some reason, this made Harry particularly angry. Did they ever listen to anybody they arrested? He couldn't blame the Aurors or McGonagall though. They were acting on Ministry orders after all, and McGonagall was under Dumbledore. Dumbledore, Ron, and Hermione were the ones he needed to talk to.

With a casual swish of his wand, Harry initiated an explosion that sent all but those three flying back, knocking some unconscious. Count Hiscophney quickly moved to keep the others who had been knocked down on the ground. "You three 'must' listen to me this time." Harry growled.

"Your actions have told us all there is to tell." Hermione said weakly, gesturing toward several mangled corpses of innocent Muggles.

"LISTEN TO HIM YOU IDIOTS!" Bellatrix screamed, stepping forward from the midst of the Ice soldiers from where she had previously avoided notice. "He's trying to tell you something."

Dumbledore looked surprised for a moment before responding. "So, Miss Black, I see that you've allied yourself with Harry."

"That's Mrs. Potter to you." Bellatrix growled.

Harry would have had to have been deaf to miss the gasps of Ron and Hermione. "You married . . . that thing?" Ron yelled. "She's a heartless whore!"

"How dare you?" Harry snarled. "Never. Insult. My. Wife. Again." He was about to step forward and inflict some physical harm upon Ron when Bellatrix calmly put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm not worth demeaning yourself that way, love." Harry sighed and relaxed.

"Why are you wasting your time insulting her?" Hermione asked Ron, her quavering voice gaining strength with every syllable. "Her evil is nothing besides Harry. What he has done is worse than thousand murders! We know that you were supposed to fight Voldemort, but instead you betrayed everyone's hope! Your heart is darker than midnight, you devil."

Harry stood stunned, no rebuttal coming to his mind for Hermione's horrid accusation. Unconsciously, he expected Bellatrix, who was probably better at comebacks, to say something. However, what she did took him and everyone else by surprise.

Without saying a word, Bellatrix quickly closed the distance between herself and the teenage girl with three quick strides. She then promptly drew back her arm and delivered a backhanded slap to Hermione's face which caused the younger female to fall backwards onto the ground.

"I may have been a heartless whore, possibly still am, and may spend the rest of my days trying to redeem myself," Bellatrix

whispered, “but at least I know deep down that I’m not a treacherous slut.”

Hermione gasped, and not willing to consider Bellatrix’s accusation with an unbiased perspective, let out a defiant scream and launched herself at her opponent’s legs. Bellatrix promptly fell onto her back as Hermione jumped onto her and began to claw at the older woman’s face.

Once Bellatrix’s surprise at being counter-attacked wore off, Hermione’s advantage gained from surprise was quickly neutralized by Bellatrix’s fighting experience and maturity. A fist to Hermione’s jaw stunned her long enough for Bellatrix to roll, putting her on top.

A few more bloody claw-marks were added to Bellatrix’s face as she straddled Hermione and sat up as Hermione shrieked her indignation. All thoughts at fighting Bellatrix flew from Hermione’s mind as Bellatrix began to methodically slap Hermione’s face over and over again as she screamed and snarled unintelligible words and sentences.

The fight came to an abrupt halt when Harry gently, but firmly grasped one of Bellatrix’s wrists. “I’m not sure that I’m worth all this effort either,” Harry said, staring into his wife’s violent violet eyes with calm reassurance.

Bellatrix didn’t say anything as Harry helped her up and guided her back away from Hermione who was being quickly approached by Ron and Professor Dumbledore.

Harry waited a moment for things to calm down before speaking levelly. “I don’t care how bad you think this looks. I did not do it. I am not responsible for the attack on Privet Drive either. I would prefer to work with the Order and Ministry so that we can defeat Voldemort. If you’re not willing to do that, then so be it. I’ll fight both of you. The Ministry for the good of the people it supposedly serves, and Voldemort because he is evil.”

“You can’t fool us with your fancy words and lies.” Ron yelled.

Harry sighed sadly as he looked from the faces of his former friends to the faces of the fallen Aurors who were only now getting up. None of them believed him. "I have no wish to fool you. You're only fooling yourself."

Chapter Twenty-Five

“I’m not very angry for some strange reason. Although, maybe I’m just too tired right now.” Harry said thoughtfully as he removed his armor and changed his clothes. He gave the robes that Voldemort had changed to gray a disparaging look. Whatever charm had been used in the capsules was now wearing off, making the wearer appear to have been frolicking in a puddle of gray paint.

Bellatrix smiled grimly as she studied her clawed-up face in a mirror. “That’s a sign that you are no longer emotionally attached to that mess. If you can think and plan without having your mind clouded by emotions, it will be better for you in the long run.”

“A mess? More like a disaster.” Harry muttered as he watched her prod a couple of cuts and speculated as to whether or not he should say anything about her fight. Maybe later. “I think that I’ll go to my study and brainstorm some plans of action against everyone. Tomorrow, I can consult with what allies I have.”

“You do that.” Bellatrix advised vaguely as she abandoned the mirror and began to see to her own clothes. She could patch up her face later. “Narcissa had quite a few shocks tonight. I’d better go check on her after washing up my face.”

Harry nodded and left the room. As soon as he was gone, Bellatrix drew one of her cherry wands and whispered a quick incantation. “*Maternus observiosso*.” A blue light flared at the end of her wand and dimmed to a pulsating glow. When she pointed the wand toward herself, the glow changed to a healthy looking green. Bellatrix sighed in relief, put the wand away, and quickly finished putting on a fresh set of robes. She then gave herself a once-over in the mirror and departed the suite to find Narcissa.

Hermione finished removing her clothes and undergarments and slipped into the warm and soothing water of the bath pool in the prefects’ bathroom. Though the water was soothing, it did little to wash away the emotional pain brought on by the confrontation in the Muggle village.

At the thought, Hermione brought one of her hands to a cheek and winced. Despite the fact that the bulk of the pain had faded away somewhat, it caused her to burst into irrational tears. How could Harry go off and marry that . . . that woman? And why did she care? He was a traitor and murderer after all.

In an attempt to distract herself from the painful feelings and confusing thoughts, she slowly attempted to swim some laps. This only exhausted her. She returned to the shallow end and sat, leaning her back against the wall of the pool, crying even harder.

What had Bellatrix called her? A treacherous slut. Was she right? Even if Harry was guilty? Probably. Bellatrix certainly seemed to believe it. The damage that the older woman had done to her face was plenty evidence of that.

She was saved from drowning in her thoughts when Ginny Weasley entered the bathroom. Ron's little sister didn't say anything until she had joined Hermione in the pool against the wall. "I thought I might find you here." Ginny commented. "Ron told me everything. I hope that Bellatrix didn't injure you seriously."

"Just a few slaps here and there." Hermione replied carefully.

"Ron was worried about injuries. I'm more worried about your emotions." Ginny stated clinically. "What Bellatrix said to you was rather harsh."

Hermione chose not to reply for several moments. Finally she broke down and told Ginny about the dilemma she was facing. Her apparent feelings of jealousy and the fears that going against Harry was wrong, despite his guilt.

"You're jealous of Bellatrix then?" Ginny asked carefully.

"I don't know." Hermione whispered.

Ginny hid a smirk. "It certainly sounds like it."

“That’s beside the point.” Hermione said. “Am I doing the right thing by standing against Harry? He was my friend since our first year at Hogwarts.”

The youngest Weasley quietly observed the colorful bubbles and variable shapes as she considered Hermione’s question. Finally, she answered. “If Harry is guilty, then you would be doing him no favors by standing by him and trying to justify his actions. If he’s too foolish to value your counsel with regards to his crimes, then you’re not at fault.”

“Do you think that Harry is guilty of killing the Muggles on Privet Drive and in that town? He claims that he did neither.” Hermione asked Ginny.

“Yes.” Ginny choked. She and Harry had not really been friends, but she had always felt a special bond from him saving her life in the Chamber of Secrets. “I think that he was fundamentally good at first, but any normal person would eventually crack given the situations Harry has gone through I’m with Ron on this, he’s most definitely guilty.”

A sigh escaped from Hermione’s lips. Her conversation with Ginny should have comforted her at the very least. For some reason, she still felt the same as she had before Ginny had shown up. “What would you do if Harry was proven innocent of all accusations?” Hermione asked, mostly out of curiosity.

There was a very long silence before Ginny replied in a quiet, but grim voice. “I would crawl to him and beg him to either kill me or torture me until I could not remember my treachery.”

Hermione’s face blanched. “That’s extreme.”

“Living and consciously knowing that I had betrayed him with my heart, let alone actions, would be worse.” Ginny whispered.

“There’s suicide.” Hermione suggested. “I don’t know if I could even stand his presence if he was proven innocent.”

Ginny shook her head. “That would be the coward’s way out. Besides, he saved my life in the Chamber of Secrets and nearly died for it. That act created a magical bond between us. It is impossible for me to commit suicide. I’m glad that it’s impossible, because I would hate to find out whether or not I’m a coward.”

At this point, both of the teenage girls were silently shedding tears. “I hope we’re not wrong.” Hermione uttered. “For both our sakes.” That statement made Hermione feel much worse. For who hoped that their friend was guilty of murder? She couldn’t win.

Narcissa was laying on the cold, stone floor next to the bed in her room when Bellatrix knocked on the door and then entered the room. She turned her attention from the plain ceiling to Bellatrix when the door closed behind her sister. “I see that you’ve survived your fight.” she observed.

“Yes.” Bellatrix said awkwardly as her face turned red as a cherry. She took a seat on the plain bed and motioned for Narcissa to get off the floor and join her. “Just a few scratches.”

“You were always the calm and cool one.” Narcissa said as she slowly sat up and then joined Bellatrix. “I never pictured you getting into a cat fight with a girl half your age. Then again, I never pictured you marrying Harry Potter either.”

Bellatrix blushed even more, if that was possible. “That girl made me furious. I’ve committed some unspeakable atrocities in my life, and Harry has done nothing but good. When I heard her accuse him like that, I guess I just lost control.”

“I’d say you did.” Narcissa laughed for a moment before growing a bit more serious. “When I first found out about you and Harry, I vaguely considered the possibility that you were up to some scheme designed to undermine him, despite your claims to the contrary. You proved me wrong tonight.”

“How?”

“Well,” Narcissa began, “you are a very skilled and fairly powerful witch. You could have probably beat the snot out of that teenager without even resorting to physical means. I didn’t see a conniving witch trying to prove her loyalty to Harry Potter tonight. I saw a woman reacting with a primal instinct to an insult against her mate’s honor.”

This embarrassed Bellatrix to no end, though she was pleased to know that Narcissa now acknowledged that her feelings for Harry were sincere. She changed the subject, to avoid further discomfort. “I came here to see if you were okay after seeing what you did in the village.”

Narcissa sighed and slumped. “No, I’m not okay. My pureblood status and former connection with the Death Eaters makes me feel about this tall.” She held out her hand and gestured with her thumb and index finger. “Your husband could probably make the world a better place by putting my head on a pike or something.”

“My husband does not put heads on pikes!” Bellatrix said indignantly.

“Indeed.” Narcissa said, smiling at a private joke.

“He doesn’t.”

“I know.” Narcissa grinned momentarily, before becoming slightly more somber. “I’ve decided that I should probably talk to him soon, however. I’ll confess to him every bad thing I ever did and ask him to help me come to terms with it all and change my ways. Do you think that he would be willing to help me?”

Bellatrix smiled happily. “Of course he will.”

“After that, maybe I can help you and Harry by doing something other than scrubbing your floors and walls. I have connections in the wizarding world. Not all of them are necessarily trustworthy, but they can still be useful to us.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Bellatrix said with a smile. “It’s late, so I’ll leave you in peace.”

The two sisters said good night to each other and Bellatrix left Narcissa’s room and made her way through the dark fortress to the master suite where she found Harry just climbing into their large bed. “Any ingenious ideas?” Bellatrix asked.

Harry smiled. “I’m not sure as to how ‘ingenious’ they are, but I do have some plans that should prove beneficial to me in the long run at the very least. Thanks for uh . . . sticking up for me back at that village, by the way.”

Bellatrix beamed at him as she changed into some nightwear. “I love you, Harry.”

THE MINISTRY CHRONICLE

‘A voice of truth, not wish-washy prophecy.’

“LORD POTTER” STRIKES

Yesterday, in a move that shocked witches and wizards worldwide, Harry James Potter violently lashed out and led his deadly forces in the decimation of a defenseless Muggle village on the north coast of Britain. Officials from the Department of Magical Law-Enforcement estimate that ‘Lord Potter’ as he has been dubbed, successfully massacred at least sixty percent of the village’s population. An additional thirty percent sustained minor injuries.

As of yet, the Ministry is unsure of Lord Potter’s motivation. A top aide from the Minister Fudge’s office stated that Potter was very likely trying to establish his presence. “This is only the beginning.” the aide said.

When Ministry forces led by Kinglsey Shacklebolt and assisted by Albus Dumbledore arrived at the location of the attack, they found Lord Potter’s followers gathered in the central square. “He adamantly denied his involvement,” said one eye-witness, “but it was painfully

obvious that he was behind the attack. Everyone could basically see the blood dripping from his hands.”

“The Ministry will not let Potter get away with this!” Cornelius Fudge stated in an emergency press conference. “We’ve begun an investigation and found that Potter owns shares in the Daily Prophet and other key companies. Steps have been taken to freeze his assets, thus the closure of the Daily Prophet. His resources must be cut off!”

The world can only hope that the Ministry will be able to successfully wage a two sided war against You-Know-Who and Lord Potter.

GOBLIN REBELLION! GRINGOTTS CLOSED!

Yesterday afternoon, Lord Gold- the head of Gringotts Bank, announced the closing of Gringotts. He stated that the bank will remain closed until further notice. However, arrangements were made for a small amount of every patrons account to be withdrawn and distributed.

Experts caution the public not to panic in any way. Minister Fudge in his press conference concerning ‘Lord Potter’ stated that he hoped that everyone could calmly adjust to the immediate decrease in the money supply. It is estimated that the economy will be able to function if everyone co-operates.

While some worry about the future of our economy, others have wondered why the goblins decided to shut down the bank. “It’s a rebellion, pure and simple.” stated Percival Weasley. “The Ministry suspects that Harry Potter may be responsible for the problem. As I speak, we are striving to iron out these problems.

Harry chucked his copy of the ‘Ministry Chronicle’ into a nearby fireplace and laughed. “Those blokes certainly have lying through their teeth down to a science. Pretty soon they’ll be blaming me for indigestion.”

“I don’t think that it’s very funny.” Bellatrix scowled as she viciously speared a sausage link with her fork. “Rotten jerks.”

“Maybe it’s my turn to be a rotten jerk.” Harry snickered.

“They already think you are.”

“True.” Harry said thoughtfully. “That means I won’t have to try very hard then.”

Bellatrix rolled her eyes with a smile. Harry’s jests had managed to cheer her up. “Whatever. I’ll leave you to your own amusement. There is some research I’d like to do today.”

Harry stood up. “I’d better get to my study. Snape, Moody, Tonks and Neville should be arriving soon. Forcing them to wait won’t be a good idea.”

“Tell Neville that the doctors are hopeful.” Bellatrix told Harry as he made his way from the dining room. “They haven’t had a chance to work on him, but he can visit them at least.”

“Will do.” Harry called back to her as he exited and made his way to the study. When he arrived, he found that the group of expected visitors waiting him in his office. “Thank you for coming. I apologize for making you wait so long.” Harry said, waving toward chairs that had magically appeared.

“Wotcher Harry!” Tonks said in greeting. “Nothing to apologize for, we were only here for a few seconds.”

“That’s good to hear.” Harry said as he took his seat. “I take it that everyone swears by the ‘Ministry Chronicle.’”

Snape wrinkled his nose in disgust. “I always thought that the Daily Prophet was a filthy rag. That ‘Chronicle’ exonerates it though.”

Moody barked a laugh. “They’re both filthy rags. No offense Harry, I’m sure you would have redeemed the Prophet if you had controlled it longer. Everyone believes the Chronicle though. What are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to wage war against both the Ministry and Voldemort.” Harry announced. “A war of words to win the popular opinion of the population, and a war of blood to destroy Voldemort. I need you all to double your efforts to convince people that I’m not the creep I’ve been painted out to be. Find people who don’t particularly like Fudge and work from there.”

“Fudge is turning into a hero.” Snape muttered.

Harry nodded. “True. Is there anyone in the Order that might be open to an approach from you guys?”

“I don’t know.” Moody said thoughtfully. “I’m mostly close to Dumbledore, and he isn’t open.”

“You could try the Weasley twins.” Neville suggested mildly. “From what I’ve heard about the Order from you folks, they haven’t been as involved as other members and they certainly haven’t done any Harry-bashing.”

Tonks nodded in agreement. “Yes, that’s a wonderful idea, Neville. They would also be a valuable inside resource if they could be convinced to join Harry.”

“Do any of you care to give them a shot?” Harry asked.

“Don’t look at me.” Snape said sourly.

“I’ll do it.” Tonks said resolutely. “I’ll even have a memory charm on hand in case they decide against you.”

Harry smiled. “That might be good protocol for approaching anybody. How is Potter’s Legion doing, Neville?”

Neville grinned. “We’re all learning quickly and our growth is exponential. Everyone is getting a little impatient about not doing anything in the way of fighting though.”

“That leads to a key part of my plan.” Harry announced with a smile. “All of the members of Potter’s Legion have parents or guardians. A great many of those parents are involved in the wizarding world. Convert the kids and the parents will be forced to listen. Especially if their kids can testify without a doubt that I have nothing to do with Voldemort’s attacks?”

“Attacks?” Tonks echoed.

Harry nodded. “Yes, attacks. Voldemort won’t stop with that one attack. From now on, whenever his Death Eaters lead a raid or make an attack on someone, they will be wearing gray cloaks. I’ll be blamed for every single thing he does.”

“So how do they know you have nothing to do with the attacks?” Moody probed.

“They’ll know because they’ll be right there counter-attacking this summer. Assuming of course that they’re interested in helping out. I can’t guarantee that none of them will get killed, but I can provide armor and weapons that will greatly improve their chances.” Harry outlined.

Neville sat up. “You can count me in. I’ll even lead the counter-attacks for you.”

“That would be appreciated. You’ll need a new name so that you aren’t associated with me though. Potter’s Legion must go.”

“I’ll come up with something by the time the term ends at Hogwarts. The week or so after the final exams would be ideal for organizing everything before people are sent home.” Neville said.

“Good.” Harry said, grinning. “That should do it.”

Snape leaned forward, “That won’t be enough, Potter. The Ministry can still cause trouble.”

“That’s why there’s another part to the whole plan.” Harry rebutted. “While Neville and his band of merry men and women are off doing their thing against Voldemort this summer, I’ll be working from behind the scenes to smear and discredit Fudge in the public eye. As Fudge’s reputation sinks, I’ll be promoting some else’s reputation. Once Fudge falls, the new person, my ally, will be a shoe-in and become the Minister of Magic.”

“That’s an excellent plan.” Tonks said. Snape, Moody, and Neville also nodded. “Who are you going to make Minister of Magic though?”

Harry smiled at them. “Do you really want to know?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Harry smiled at them. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes!" They all chorused.

"Well, that's too bad." Harry snickered. "It wouldn't be very wise to spout off the name of my candidate when I haven't even approached that person yet."

Tonks rolled her eyes in a very annoyed manner. "Very funny, Harry. Do you think that this person will be likely to work with you? Especially after all that you have and will be blamed for?"

"Who can resist the lure of power and glory?" Harry countered. "It's a very Slytherin-like way to deal with someone, but I've been backed into a corner. I'll make this person such a big hero in the eyes of all British wizardry that I may not even have to shove Fudge out of office. They'll drag him out for me."

"How?" Moody asked.

"You'll see." Harry smiled. "I think that we've covered enough. Remember to work on bringing people around to believing that I'm not a murderer."

Everyone stood up and Snape pulled out the special Portkey that Harry had sent to him. They were about to leave when Harry stopped them for a moment. "Neville? Would you like to visit your parents for a moment? I can make a separate Portkey."

"Sure, Harry." Neville said, stepping away from the others. They portkeyed away as Harry and Neville left the study, talking amiably as they made their way to where the Longbottoms were being looked after.

Harry took aim, waved his black ash wand casually, and whispered an incantation. "Maximus twiserio aeros." A silent explosion jerked Harry's arm and conjured dummies were violently tossed away from him, some crashing into rocks, others being thrown to the ground,

and still others blown for over a hundred feet into the choppy ocean as Harry watched with fascination.

The elemental style of spells were difficult to cast, unpredictable at best, and classified as extremely dangerous- yet Harry had found them to be very effective thus far. They could be used against a large host of enemies, but Harry was nervous about the well-being of anyone fighting by his side. The results of the elemental spells didn't affect him, but they might affect others.

He was about to summon the dummies back to try another elemental spell when he sensed someone approaching from behind. A glance back toward the fortress revealed Narcissa Black picking her way across the not so very smooth beach as she made her way in his general direction.

After several minutes, Narcissa finally came close enough to speak to him. "Could we talk . . . milord?" she asked carefully, apparently unsure as to how she should address him.

Harry nodded, then said in a fairly happy tone, "But I insist you call me Harry." He then put his wand away and stepped over the relatively smooth piece of ground and sat down cross-legged.

Narcissa frowned at the dusty sand and sharp rocks before gingerly sitting down across from him. For this conversation, she would rather face him and judge his reactions. He was currently studying her with his luminescent emerald green eyes. "I'm sorry." she blurted out, wanting to smack herself as soon as she realized that she had already lost her composure. She had always prided herself on keeping it in all situations. Perhaps it was his eyes.

"For what?"

She squirmed for a few minutes before answering. "Everything, I suppose."

Harry smiled calmly at her. "What is everything?"

"Aiding Death Eaters, supporting people like the Dark lord, stuff like that." Narcissa said shakily, trying to gloss over the subject that she herself had brought up. Instead of answering, Harry continued to study her thoughtfully. In an attempt to fill up the silence, Narcissa elaborated. "I suppose that I'm sorry for my whole attitude as well."

Still nothing. Therefore, she continued to talk, and before she knew it-she had divulged everything she had ever thought or done to Harry. She even told him about tripping her cousin Sirius down the stairs once when a child. "So, I just want to say I'm sorry."

"How sorry?" Harry asked as he played with some rocks that he had found lying in the sand.

What did he mean? How could one measure sorrow for past actions? Unless he was referring to punishment. Of course. Punishment. Not only had she gone through life with a bad attitude and contempt for others, but she had committed a few crimes as well.

The consequences must follow. What would he do? Send her to Azkaban? He certainly could now that he controlled that island. Or worse. Narcissa drew a deep breath and prayed that he didn't know about the special chamber deep in the dungeons of his fortress. "Sorry enough to take any punishment you see fit to inflict." And she really was that sorry.

An annoyed look flitted across Harry's face. "What do you think I am, woman? Some Dark lord who tortures people who goof up? Or perhaps a Lord High Executioner? You didn't do any of that stuff against me."

Narcissa made a noncommittal noise that didn't seem to have any particular meaning to it.

"I wanted to know if you're sorry enough to change." Harry explained calmly. "After that, it's up to you to figure out how to pay your debt to society or whatever you want to call it."

"I am definitely sorry enough to change." Narcissa announced, trying to inflict some strength into her voice. "But, I was hoping that you would help me pay my debt to society. You're working against the Dark lord and the corruption in the Ministry. If you allowed me to help you, I think that would go a long ways toward fixing things."

"What can you do to help me then?" Harry inquired, now looking straight into the blonde woman's timid eyes.

Narcissa began to idly draw in the sand. "Well, I know a lot of people and have social connections. You're powerful, but you lack means by which to channel your power. I could open up connections and broaden your influence."

"That would be useful." Harry said in a thoughtful tone.

"Please let me!" she begged, realizing that this was probably her only chance to redeem herself and turn her life around.

"All right then." Harry said, slightly intimidated by her suddenly servile attitude. "You can go back to the castle and tell Bellatrix or the housekeeper to set you up in a better bedroom. Talk to Reggins and I'm sure he'll be able to assign you a place to work from. I'll talk to you tomorrow about some people I'd like to . . . influence from off the bat."

Narcissa leapt forward from her sitting position and landed on her knees- causing Harry to start and nearly fall back. She grabbed his hand and began to pepper his signet ring with kisses. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." she said over and over again. Before Harry could say anything, she stood up and quite nearly skipped back to the fortress.

"Absolutely bonkers." he muttered to himself. He laid back in the sand and allowed himself a laugh. Perhaps Narcissa would be able to assist him with contacting his proposed candidate and if not, at least set some things up.

Bellatrix hummed a lullaby to herself as she poured a small amount of rat blood into the boiling gray potion. As soon as the red liquid made

contact with the gray, the boiling immediately ceased and the mixture soon swirled into a sickly shade of pink. Within moments, the pink mixture had thickened considerably and reached a chilly temperature.

Several special dueling dummies were summoned from their resting places against the wall, and one by one dunked into the large cauldron and its disgusting potion. Bellatrix then performed some more magic to banish them each to their own table.

A couple of cleaning spells later, and Bellatrix was making her way up to Narcissa's new office. Unconsciously, a smile crossed her lips. Her sister had finally seen the light and was now contributing her talents to Harry's cause. Narcissa had played the social scene more than she herself had, and therefore was more useful in the regard of contacting prominent wizarding folk in Britain. It was a shame that she was not acquainted with the Ministry official that Harry had developed an interest in.

However, Narcissa had already been useful in other ways and would certainly prove helpful in the future. She had already lined Harry up with those in a position to deal with money obscurely . . no matter the source of purpose.

Bellatrix soon arrived at the right hall, and was soon in front of Narcissa's door. She knocked, and opened it up to find her sister and husband discussing a new matter that Harry felt was necessary. Harry flashed a tender smile at her before turning his attention back to some sort of diagram Narcissa was making on a piece of parchment.

"The Tremayne's have this annoying tendency to stay neutral during any sort of conflict or disagreement, but I'm sure that given the circumstances that you plan to create, they will have no other choice but to make a move beneficial to your purposes- whether or not they're aware that you're behind the events." Narcissa explained to Harry, as she positively beamed at Bellatrix.

"Exactly!" Narcissa concurred as Bellatrix sat down in a chair and observed the ongoing dialogue.

The discussion of various family positions continued for several minutes until Harry moved onto the structure of the Ministry. “It isn’t a requirement that one has to be a Department Head to become Minister, correct?”

“Not necessarily.” the blonde Black sister hedged. “But, it’s a long-standing tradition and those are sometimes difficult to break.

“Wouldn’t they make an exception for someone perceived to be a hero? None of the Department Heads have done anything that can be commended to improve the situation of the Wizarding World thus far- therefore, if my man does something big, he would be the only one on the playing field.” Harry said.

Narcissa smiled. “They probably would- assuming that there was a good reason to oust Fudge.”

“I think that Bellatrix can provide enough dirt to bury him six feet deep.” Harry said wryly, glancing at his wife for confirmation.

His wife grinned predatorily. “More than six feet, dear.”

“I think that covers it then.” Harry mused. “Thank you for your time, Narcissa.”

“My pleasure, Harry.” Narcissa glowed, reminding Harry in some twisted way of Dobby. “Reggins wanted me to finish analyzing these reports, so I’d better get to them.”

Harry stood up, quickly followed by Bellatrix. “Well, I won’t stop you then.” He waved and the couple exited the small office hand-in-hand.

“Any good news from Hiscophney?” Bellatrix inquired.

A frustrated sigh seemed to erupt from Harry. “Nothing good. For the past two weeks, Voldemort has been hitting a town or two every night. The Death Eaters stay only long enough to slaughter a few Muggles,

torture a couple of people, and they're gone before Hiscophney even has time to assemble his strike team."

"Then you get all the credit for the attacks." Bellatrix concluded.

"That sums it up."

"People hate me now more than ever, thanks to the explicit details the Ministry Chronicle always provides." Harry grumbled.

Bellatrix shrugged. "I think that they'll eventually come around, love. Right now you should concern yourself with the Ministry. You'll also need to tell Hiscophney to engineer a new plan of fighting back. Voldemort has found a way to combat strike teams- not that he didn't have one before."

Tonks glanced up at the large, glittering sign above Weasley Wizard Wheezes and drew a deep breath. If the twins weren't able to be convinced, then no one would be convinced. Without wasting another moment, Tonks entered the shop and managed to make her way unmolested to the counter where both twins were working on their newest invention, taking advantage of a slow moment.

"Wotcher!" Tonks greeted them, attempting to inflect her voice with more confidence than she felt.

"It's our favorite Auror." Fred grinned.

"What can we do for you?" George asked.

Butterflies fiercely attacked Tonk's chest and it was a moment before she responded. "How do you feel about this whole mess concerning Harry?" she blurted out, wanting to smack herself as soon as she repeated her words in her mind. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

Silence descended over the shop as the twins grew more serious and seemed to concentrate more on their project. Finally Fred answered quietly, after sweeping the shop with his eyes to check for unwanted listeners. "The whole thing seems rather . . . fishy."

“Yeah.” George agreed. “Saint Potter goes on a murdering spree. Bollocks.”

Fred elbowed George. “Careful what you say! She’s an Auror you know.”

“She’s not a Fudge flunkey!” George exclaimed, giving Tonks a flirtatious grin. “Any dope can see that.”

“How about a Dumbledore flunkey then?” Fred muttered.

George winced. “Didn’t think about that.”

“Look you two- I’m not a Fudge or Dumbledore flunkey.” Tonks said, trying to clear things up. “How do you feel about the attacks that have been going on during the pat two weeks up north? Everyone says that Harry has done it- what do you think?”

Fred looked at her suspiciously. “Why are you asking us all these questions?”

“Will you please just trust me and answer?” Tonks pleaded. “I swear, I am not trying to get you into trouble or anything like that.”

“Oh all right.” Fred acquiesced.

George set down the unidentifiable thing he had been tinkering with and set his elbows on the counter. “Ron and Ginny came back from that first village and went on for hours about how they had caught Harry in the act and what a horrible person he was. Mum fiercely agreed and even promoted the idea, and our father tried to pretend he wasn’t involved. It made for a rather merry circus.”

“Get to the point.” Fred advised.

“Oh, yes. Well, we noticed throughout the whole thing that not one of them actually saw Harry cast a spell of any sort for or against the Muggles in the town. Then as they kept going on about his faults, it

came out that no one has actually seen him do anything." George said.

"What if I told you he was innocent?"

Fred and George both raised their eyebrows. "We didn't expect you or anyone else to take that type of attitude toward him."

"Lots already have." Tonks informed them. "Most of the members of the former DA, Lupin, Moody, and Snape."

"Snape!" Both of the twins exclaimed loudly.

Tonks shrugged. "I suppose he believes in Harry's innocence and ability to bring down You-Know-Who."

"I guess so!" Fred said loudly.

George looked slightly disturbed. "There's a lot of first-class idiots out there. I would have thought Snape the absolutely last person to believe in Harry's innocence. Hopefully the world is ready to face Harry Potter's wrath."

"Does that mean you believe he's innocent too?" Tonks asked eagerly.

"Depends on who is asking." Fred said casually.

Tonks grinned at them. "What if a Harry Potter funkey was asking you?"

"I reckon that's good enough for us." George said.

Harry pulled a slip of parchment from a cloak pocket and compared the address written on it to the house that he was standing in front of. They matched. He put the parchment away and studied the dwelling curiously.

It stood in a fairly wealthy Muggle neighborhood. Despite this, the appearance was rather modest and homely looking. Kind of like the Burrow, except that it was cleaner, less disorganized and not so poor.

Hoping that the owners' characteristics were similar, Harry Apparated into a small room that seemed to serve as a study of sorts. There was a desk with files strewn all over it- most of them Ministry files dealing with Gringotts. There were also toys strewn across the floor and a large bookcase with children's books of every sort.

Conjuring a seat, Harry sat down and waited . Someone would come into the room eventually. As the time passed, Harry listened to the noises that the resident family made. From what he could gather it was some sort of story time.

After half an hour, the noisy pitter-patter of feet could be heard going past the door and up a flight of stairs a woman's voice asked if someone would be coming up to tuck the little ones in bed.

"Just a minute, dear. I need to put the book away." came a male voice.

Harry stood up as the door opened to admit a man of medium height, dark blonde hair, and in the neighborhood of about thirty years. He was casually flipping through a storybook with big pictures in it.

Sensing the presence of another person in the room, the man abruptly froze and then slowly moved one of his hands toward a light switch. Harry made no move to stop him. The lights clicked on and the man took one look at Harry and nearly fainted.

"What are you doing here! What do you want?"

A smile spread across Harry's face as he spread his arms innocently. "I have a proposition for you, Mr. Mockridge."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“What kind of proposition would anyone like you have for me?” The man demanded, seemingly insulted that a person of Harry’s reputation had deigned to contact him. “I’m no Death Eater, neither do I condone what you have done.”

Harry shrugged and waved his hand, causing two inviting chairs to appear near them. “What I have to say will take more than a few moments . . . Cuthbert, do you mind if I call you that?” He sat down.

Mockridge eyed the chair across from Harry suspiciously before gingerly sitting down on it. As it was, he still looked as if he expected the chair to explode at any moment. Perhaps if the twins were around. “I prefer ‘Bert,’ and I suppose you can call me that.”

“Wonderful.” Harry said cheerfully. “You can call me Harry. Now as I said, I came here tonight with a proposition for you. But first, I might as get some things out of the way.”

“Like your current hobby?” Bert jibed.

Ignoring Mockridge’s attitude, Harry carefully explained his story to the Ministry official, mostly concentrating on the facts that he was innocent and based on his past reputation, he would have no reason to commit the crimes he stood accused of.

Bert, who was a generally polite person by nature, listened to Harry’s story and was even somewhat inclined to believe Harry innocent of wrong-doing. “I suppose I can give you the benefit of the doubt, somewhat.” he said to Harry warily. “I don’t understand why you are here though.”

Harry chose to work around to his topic carefully. “You are the head of the Goblin Liaison office, are you not?”

“That’s what I do.”

"Would I be correct in assuming that you had nothing to do with Minister Fudge and his assistant, Percy Weasley, attempting to order Gringotts to surrender all of my assets to the Ministry?"

Bert Mockridge studied Harry with arched eyebrows. "So, you know about that. You must get around, considering that fact that Fudge is doing his best to cover his tracks in that regard." He then sighed. "I had nothing to do with it and was very offended that he went over my head in that respect, not that I would have done what he had his mind set on doing though."

"I wondered why the Ministry Chronicle was so fuzzy about the cause of the closure." Harry remarked.

"The Minister's reputation must not be stained." Mockridge said caustically, seemingly forgetting whom he was have the conversation with. "No one is openly blaming me for the problems with Gringotts . . . yet, but as purses and pouches get lighter, the pressure on me to negotiate a re-opening increases. Everybody is desperate for the bank to reopen and that desperation is exponential. Next week I could be out of a job."

A slightly predatory gleam sparkled in Harry's eyes. "One of the main reasons that Gringotts closed its doors in response to Fudge's unconventional demands is that I'm their ally. I signed a treaty with Lord Gold a couple of months ago."

"Glad to hear that someone in this world has brains." Bert grumbled. "I've been trying to convince Fudge to sign a broader and more equal treaty with them since the day I became head of the office. What does that have to do with me and the Ministry though?"

"I can convince Lord Gold and his associates to re-open the bank." Harry announced, finally coming to point of the conversation. "If you were to get the credit for the bank reopening, you would be an instant hero, wouldn't you?"

Bert's suspicion returned to his face as he remembered that he was talking to Harry Potter, whose intentions were unknown. "I suppose I would be. Why?"

"Voldemort," Harry said firmly, ignoring Mockridge's cringe, "needs to be stopped and Fudge is incompetent. Britain needs a Minister of Magic that will fight. It also needs a Minister that is fair enough to recognize my innocence and to at least work with me. A hero would be a shoe-in. How would you like to be the Minister of Magic, Bert?"

The bureaucrat looked at Harry with shock painted on his face. You want to make me... the Minister of Magic? I suppose I'd do my best, but I'm not so sure about it. Do you think that it's possible?"

"It's possible if you're with me and will understand that I'm trying to fight Voldemort, and am not off killing Muggles." Harry said bluntly.

"I suppose I can accept your innocence . . . but officially, there are some snags." Bert explained. "No 'honest' Minister of Magic can overturn your supposed conviction just like that. A pardon is out of the question. During the First War, there were problems in that area and certain restrictions were instituted by the Winzengamot. You need to prove your innocence. However, I would overlook that, and would not attempt to arrest you or impede your actions."

Harry was disappointed, but understood. "I see."

"If I was the Minister, I would give you another trial, but Lucius Malfoy is dead. Your followers saw to that when St. Mungo's was attacked."

"No, don't worry about that." Harry said. "The question is, are you with me? Would you accept the position as Minister and would you work with me against Voldemort."

Bert was about to answer when the door opened to admit a slightly irritated woman. "What's taking you so long?" she demanded, looking around to see what her husband was up to. She screamed when she saw Harry.

Both men leapt to their feet and before Harry could wandlessly initiate a silencing charm, Bert had quieted his wife who still looked panicked. “Could you let me think about it?” Mockridge asked.

Harry nodded. “Yes, of course. Send me an owl when you make your decision.”

“I will.” Mockridge answered.

“Good.” Harry said. “I’ll leave you to explain everything to your lovely wife.” He nodded to them both, pulled one of his wands from his cloak, and Apparated back to Nair’icaix.

“Weren’t you planning to do some more studying for our exams?” Ron inquired.

Hermione looked up at him from all of the papers, charts, maps, and books strewn over one of the tables in the Gryffindor common room. “I did some.” she answered. “Then I got distracted I guess. Are you off to practice then?”

“No Quidditch practice tonight, but I’ll go out and do some flying anyway. Have to be ready for those Ravenclaw chasers. I don’t think they’ll be too much of a problem when it comes down to it though.” he answered, slightly smug.

“Have fun.” Hermione said distractedly as she dug a Ministry Chronicle from out of the stack and examined an article that detailed one of ‘Harry’s’ attacks on a Muggle village up on the northern coast.

Ron nodded, “I will. Don’t forget to take a break though.” He then left through the portrait hole, leaving a silent but crowded common room. Nearly everyone was putting in study time for exams.

After reading through the article, Hermione was able to pinpoint the actual name of the Muggle village. She set the newspaper down and found a map with several marks on it. The location of the attacked village was found and Hermione promptly placed an ‘X’ over it with her quill.

That being the latest attack, Hermione was finished with her marks. She blew on the map to speed up the ink drying process and then examined her handiwork. A line of X's marched across the northern coast. There was a slight pattern to the violence. The line of X's weren't in order, so it was impossible to identify precisely when and where the next attack would be. But she could now make some guesses.

As Hermione studied the map and contemplated, Ginny finished her schoolwork for the night and made her way over to the table. "What are you doing?"

"I was thinking I might be able to anticipate some of Harry's attacks." Hermione said vaguely.

"Is that so you can advise Fudge and Dumbledore to send Aurors in advance?" Ginny asked, slightly impressed at the sense Hermione had displayed with the map. Had anyone else thought of that?

Hermione sighed. "No, I can't predict the attacks for sure, and the Aurors are too few to be stationed in every possible village."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Well, I've been thinking." Hermione said quietly, trying her best to keep her emotions from bursting out uncontrollably. "I was one of Harry's friends, and I've realized that maybe we are not giving him much of a chance. Even if he is bad, we have to try and redeem him. We owe him that much, at the very least I think."

Ginny's face remained unnaturally impassive. "So you intend to get to those villages and hope that he attacks the one you're in at the right time? Then what? 'Hello Harry, can you spare a moment from your amusements and have a cup of tea with me?'"

"No!" Hermione exclaimed. "I don't know." She sighed. "I just have this feeling that I should try something like that. Maybe I'll get lucky."

"Well . . . good luck then." Ginny said, sounding kind of strange. She walked off and climbed the stairs to the girls' dormitory.

Hermione nodded, barely noticing Ginny's departure before she took a blank sheet of parchment and began to methodically write a list of the villages and towns that could be in the running for an attack. Now, for the next step. Making a list was one thing. Getting to the villages, especially while the term was still on would be difficult. Dumbledore might be able to help though.

Not much later, Hermione was riding the stairs up to the Headmaster's office, list of villages clutched in her sweaty hand. He had to say yes. What would she do if he didn't? Forget about it til summer then."

She entered the office to find Professor Dumbledore and the Minister of Magic having a late drink together. Dumbledore acknowledged her presence with a nod and smile, Fudge stood up and beamed. "Miss Granger, how nice to see you. The statements that you and Mr. Weasley provided have proved invaluable to the Ministry these past weeks."

"Thank you, Minister." Hermione said nervously.

"What can I do for you?" Dumbledore asked as Fudge returned to his drink, content to wait the professor and his student out.

Hermione glanced at Fudge sideways. He probably wouldn't appreciate her motives. "I've done some research and have found a vague pattern associated with Harry's attacks. It's impossible to predict precisely when or where he will strike, but I would like to have the chance to randomly visit these villages and hope that perhaps I'll be there at the right time. I have a list of possible targets right here."

"What for?" Dumbledore inquired.

"Someone needs to talk to Harry." Hermione answered nervously. "Maybe he can see reason." That wasn't the whole reason, but there

was no point in explaining further. Especially with the Minister in the room.

Fudge stood up. "I doubt that he'll see reason, Miss Granger. But I still like your plan. If we can actually get an eyewitness to testify that Harry is responsible, then the public will respond more eagerly to our attempts to fight him. If you're there, you might also be able to glean important information about the attacks in general."

Dumbledore frowned at the Minister. "How can you approve of one of my students putting herself in danger like this?"

"Nonsense! She's a capable young witch, I reckon that she'll be fine." Fudge said, paying no attention to the aged professor. "We'll have to arrange for transportation though. I can arrange for a special Portkey that will be programmed to take you to any of those villages."

"That would be wonderful." Hermione stated as calmly as possible.

Fudge nodded importantly. "If you'll just let me have that list, I'll see about getting that Portkey."

Hermione handed him her list. "All right then, I'll be waiting for that Portkey."

She nodded to the two men, Fudge who looked immensely satisfied and Dumbledore who seemed slightly disapproving, and then exited the office. Perhaps this would help to ease the guilt that she had a hard time overcoming.

It could create problems though. Ginny had not seemed terribly excited by the prospects, and might be inclined to tell Ron everything. Little did she know how wrong she was about Ginny's feelings concerning the matter.

After her talk with Hermione, Ginny had rushed up the stairs of the Gryffindor girls' dormitories. She opened the door to the fifth-year dormitory and entered the empty room. Upon dropping her things onto the floor, Ginny collapsed upon her four-poster bed.

As she lay there, she couldn't help but think about what had just occurred downstairs. She found it very odd that Hermione, one of Harry's former best friends and one of the chief witnesses against him, was going out of her way to help him.

The thing that gnawed away at her the most though, was that Ginny knew that she owed Harry a life-debt. She had not done , nor was she doing anything about it. These thoughts began to overwhelm the youngest Weasley and she began to sob bitter tears of self-recrimination.

Morning arrived and Harry woke up. However, he did not open his eyes or get out of bed because he couldn't help but enjoy and luxuriate in the feeling of Bellatrix snuggling up to him. Harry wasn't sure, but he thought that she might be somewhat awake as well.

When she abruptly stiffened and stopped breathing for a moment, Harry became fairly sure that she was indeed awake. Before he could ask what was wrong, Bellatrix threw off the bedcovers and darted across the room and straight into the bathroom.

Almost immediately, Harry could hear her noisily retching. Frowning, he got out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. When he entered he found her heaving into the toilet. Fortunately, her business seemed to be finished. "Are you sick?" he asked.

Bellatrix shook her head negatively as she finished and flushed. She then washed her mouth out. "It's called morning sickness."

"What's that?"

"It commonly afflicts pregnant women." Bellatrix explained as a silver platter with saltine crackers and a glass of water appeared.

"Oh." Harry said, the meaning not quite registering in his slightly groggy mind. It wasn't long before it did though. "Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Do you mean to say that you're... you're pregnant?"

The largest smile that Harry had ever seen graced Bellatrix's face and she wrapped her arms around him tightly and kissed him when

he returned the embrace. "Yes, I'm pregnant. We're going to be parents around Christmas or early January. I'm not sure as to the exact date conception occurred, but every calculation and spell has indicated that time period."

"That's wonderful." Harry said with a vague smile. He was going to be a father. Did every man feel like this when he found out that his wife was pregnant? He hoped so. "So you're feeling okay? Nothing wrong or anything, right?"

Bellatrix smiled knowingly. "Other than just heaving my guts, everything is perfectly fine. Morning sickness is nothing to new to expecting mothers all over. Nothing to worry about in the health department."

"Good." Harry said before he hugged her even more tightly and kissed her.

They spent the rest of the morning in bed, holding each other close and silently contemplating this new development. Bella was currently resting her head on her husbands chest listening to his heart beat. With all of the running to and from the loo it helped to have something to take her mind of her queasy stomach.

As she did this Harry was thinking of all the things that he would do with their child. Harry was bound and determined that his child would have all the things that he himself had been deprived of. Bella smiled as Harry placed butterfly kisses upon her face until he became so overjoyed at his impending fatherhood that he captured his wife's lips. Bella was enjoying all the attention Harry was giving her at this most tender of moments. She smiled happily and mentally rejoiced as she pondered what in her life had she done to ever deserve this.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

After a very calm and peaceful lunch, Harry and Bellatrix mutually decided that they needed to separate so that he could take care of his daily business and so that she could work on her various projects and studies.

When Harry entered his office humming a cheerful tune, he found a letter from Cuthbert Mockridge awaiting him. Harry eagerly took his seat and broke the seal holding the heavy parchment shut. He unfolded the letter and read:

Dear Mr. P-

My wife and I have decided that your generous proposal would be beneficial to all concerned, therefore I accept. Avoid using owl post until further notice. To work out the necessary details, feel free to call on me during the late hours of the evening on any night.

‘B’M

Harry smiled as he crumpled up the letter and wandlessly incinerated it. It was good to know that Mockridge was smart and cautious enough to realize that owl could be intercepted. Although he doubted that any letter mailed using Nair’icaix’s unique postal system could be intercepted, he had to give way to the fact that it was best not to have secrets on paper anyway.

“That’s wonderful!” Narcissa squealed, reacting as if she was a much younger woman as she hugged her sister who had just arrived in her new and vastly more comfortable bedroom. It had been a long time since she had been involved with a family member’s pregnancy. “What did Harry say when you told him?”

Bellatrix smiled happily, sat on the edge of Narcissa’s bed, and fell back. “He was quite surprised. After all, how many men his age find out their wife is pregnant? The first thing he asked was if I was okay. Then we kissed and cuddled the whole morning!”

"I wish that I was married to a man who treated me like that. When I told Lucius that I was pregnant, the first thing he asked was whether or not it would be a boy. I don't know what he would have done if Draco had been a female." Narcissa said as she joined Bellatrix on the bed.

Bellatrix smiled and gave a vague answer due to the fact that she was still cherishing the time spent between her and Harry that morning. "He probably would have neglected the child and gotten you pregnant again as soon as possible."

"Probably." Narcissa agreed. "Of course this is a better reaction than the one you would have received from Rodolphus. I imagine that he would have been greatly disturbed by the prospects of fatherhood."

"Yes, he would have." Bellatrix stated sadly. "But now I have someone who, just like me, wants children." Bella paused as tears of joy once more come to her face, "I still can't believe that he wants children with me... and that we're going to be parents. I'm going to be a mother."

Narcissa simply held her sister as they lay in silence, contemplating the subject until the blonde haired older sister decided to speak up. "I'm a mother, but not a very good one."

"You shouldn't blame yourself for Draco..." Bellatrix said slowly. "Lucius never really gave you a chance to be a real mother to him."

"Maybe you're right." Narcissa sighed. "But I'll never know, will I? Let's move onto a happier topic though. Have you thought of any good names yet?"

Mockridge entered his living room and smirked when he saw Harry sitting in one of the chair located in a dark corner. "You're not going to give me a chance to change my mind, are you?"

"No," Harry said, "I'm not. I also want to get the plans moving as soon as possible. Timing will play a significant role in how things turn out. If you save the day too soon, then they won't appreciate your

efforts as much. On the other hand, if the bank doesn't open in time, what's the point?"

"All right then." Bert acknowledged. "Your reasoning is certainly sound."

"Where is your wife?" Harry inquired.

Bert shrugged as he sat down. "She has decided that it is best if she can remain ignorant of our dealings. Plausible denial, if you will. Then of course, I get the impression that she is still suspicious of you."

"Naturally." Harry muttered. He understood the attitude of Mockridge's wife, but it still stung somewhat. Being treated as an outcast of society by people that he held basic respect for hurt him.

Mockridge sat down and immediately launched the discussion into making plans. "The Ministry, or rather, Fudge- now controls the media. WWN has always been under control of the Ministry and the Ministry Chronicle has assumed the delivery of newspapers to all of the former subscribers of the Daily Prophet. If the bank opens, like you seem to think you can arrange, how are we to communicate to the general public that it was 'my' doing?"

"That is a difficult obstacle." Harry said quietly as he pondered the problem. "We'll have to communicate directly to the public and hope that whatever we tell them spreads by word of mouth."

A wand was produced from Bert's robes and a platter of biscuits was conjured. "A crowd must be gathered then. It must be some sort of public event or conference. In order to gather they must have a motivation to do so. Who would a great deal of people come to listen to?" Mockridge mused aloud as he helped himself to some of his own cookies and motioned for Harry to do so as well.

"I don't think that you'll be able to attract many as the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office." Harry said dryly as he reached for the platter.

"True." Mockridge confessed.

Harry grinned. "I reckon that the goblins could though. Gringotts currently holds all of British wizardry by their throats, via their purses. People will come if Gringotts has something to say to them, especially if there's a possibility that the bank will open."

"All right then." Bert nodded. "If your influence is as widespread as you claim, it shouldn't be a problem for you to convince the goblins in charge at the bank to call some sort of conference. The Chronicle won't ignore that kind of an announcement and even if it did, letters could be sent to all of Gringott's patrons."

"Next question: When do we have the goblins hold this conference?" Harry said slowly. "Would it be wise to announce that you're beginning negotiations, or to simply announce that you've 'negotiated' a bank re-opening the day before Gringotts re-opens?"

Mockridge shrugged. "Somewhere in between I think. If the event is something that they've expected, then my 'achievement' won't be as appreciated and Fudge would have time to claim that it was his idea and that he's working hard to back me up. On the other hand, if it is announced the day before, they'll get their money and not give me a second thought."

"How about announcing that an agreement has been made and that the bank will re-open about a week before it actually does?" Harry suggested. "That way, they'll still be hungry for their money, and will eagerly look forward to the day it opens and keep in mind who saved the day."

"Assuming of course that they don't go out and splurge with their last saved up funds, all the while forgetting about the current situation and then going to the bank to re-fill their purses as if nothing happened in between." Bert grinned. "That's what my wife would do anyway I would too, if I were more into shopping."

Harry nibbled on one of the biscuits thoughtfully as he considered the valid point that Mockridge had made. "That's where timing comes in.

We have to wait until there's no money to splurge with. Everyone needs to be within millimeters of the end of the line."

"And where is the end of the line?"

"If we cross it, then we'll find out." Harry said, smiling at his fatalistic humor. "You're involved with the Ministry and more qualified to make judgements as to the condition of society than I am, since I'm somewhat removed from everything. I, on the other hand, am more connected with the goblins who are economic experts. We'll both need to keep our ears open."

"What about turning public opinion away from Fudge?" Mockridge asked.

Harry stood up, communicating that their conversation was nearly over. "I'll handle that. When it looks as if things are about to get to the point at which we can announce the re-opening of Gringotts, I'll start making use of some . . . information my wife acquired and her sister's connections."

"What about an actual agreement with the goblins? It would look best if some sort of document is produced with me signature on it, and the Ministry technically does need to renegotiate some points of . . . procedure with the goblins anyway."

"I'll let you know when I can arrange a favorable meeting for everyone. It would be best if I didn't spring you on the goblins without their prior knowledge." Harry stated.

Bert winced as he too stood up. "Yes, they don't appreciate surprises. What about communication between us? Will you visit me to find out what I've learned about the situation?"

"No," Harry said, shaking his head, "too many meetings could lead to discovery of our connections. We'll measure the social-economic state of society on a scale of one to ten. Ten being as it is now, zero indicating that the time is ripe to re-open the bank. When you feel that

things have gotten slightly worse, owl me a piece of parchment with a nine written on it.”

“That’s a good idea. What happens when I send you a zero?”

A grim smile spread across Harry’s face. “The final blow will be struck against Fudge. I or my followers will coordinate things with you at that point. I’ll contact you before then about a meeting with the goblins.”

“All right.” Mockridge said, betraying his unease at the whole plan for the first time. “I’ll just wait for you to contact me then and keep an eye on the situation.”

“You do that.” Harry said as he pulled his Black Ash wand from his cloak. “Have a nice night.”

He then left Cuthbert Mockridge to his thoughts with a faint pop. In an instant, Harry was standing outside Nair’icaix’s master-suite. It was quite late, therefore when he entered the room as he sheathed his wand, he saw that his wife had already gone to bed.

A peaceful smile crossed his face as he quickly changed into a pair of muggle shorts and a t-shirt. It felt nice to be able to come home to a loving wife and soon to be family. He climbed into bed as softly as he could, so as not to disturb Bellatrix, but discovered upon settling down that his efforts had been pointless.

She had waited up for him, though she lay in the bed as if asleep. Without saying anything, she turned toward him and buried her face in his shoulder as she snuggled up tightly against him with a peaceful sigh.

A wave of both exhilaration and disappointment shot through Hermione as she answered the last question on the History of Magic final. The final exams were now all over and within a few days, the Hogwarts students would be journeying home to their families . . . assuming that they were still alive of course.

Ironically, the test had covered goblin rebellions. As the weeks wore on and the sting of a closed bank began to be felt widely, Minister Fudge seemed unable to do anything. The attacks up north had continued and Fudge had tried to rescue his falling popularity by spouting off fierce promises to stay Lord Polairix's hand and bring him to justice, though he was unable to really do anything against Harry.

Hermione's little project of attempting to catch Harry in the act had been put on hold due to the exams and other events. Though Fudge had wasted no time in having a special Portkey sent to her, Hermione had not had the time to make good use of it.

That's why she was both exhilarated and disappointed about the end of exams. Normally she loved to take the exams and display her studied knowledge to receive the instructor's approval, but that normal feeling had been countered by her plans to visit a potential village to be attacked the night of the last exam.

The feeling was further magnified by the fact that every village attacked between the time she had drawn up her list and now had been on her list of predicted village. All she had to do was depend on a little luck. And as callous as it was to admit, the attacked villages which had been crossed off the list left a much higher chance of getting the right village sooner.

“Hermione!”

“What?” Hermione responded automatically, as she pulled herself from the reverie she had sunk into. Apparently Ron had been trying to get her attention for a few moments.

“I was wondering if you wanted to go out to the lake for some rest and relaxation.” Ron impatiently explained to her.

Hermione glanced at her watch and sighed. “I’m sorry Ron, but I’m committed to do something else tonight and there’s not enough time to go to the lake. Maybe tomorrow?”

“All right.” Ron sighed. “See you later then?”

“Maybe.” Hermione said, avoiding her true intentions. “See you later then.” Then, in order to prevent Ron from asking more questions, she sped up quickly made her way to Gryffindor Tower where she stashed the notes that she had studied while they waited for the test began.

She quickly changed her robes to clothing that would blend in better with the inhabitants of her chosen village, and promptly pulled the wooden cube that served as her special portkey from its hiding place in her trunk.

Without wasting another moment, she uttered an activation code and a short jerk later, found herself standing in a discreet alley in one of the random villages. She wasn’t sure which, because it didn’t matter the first time.

Responding to the rumble of her stomach, Hermione made her way out of the alley and down the street and into the first pub that she came upon. The patrons all gave her strange looks, being that she was not from around the area, but generally ignored her.

Would an attack happen here? Hermione wondered. Tonight? The very thoughts caused her to shiver. When the gruff man behind the counter asked what she wanted, she unconsciously replied. “An order of Fish and Chips, and then a Butterbeer please.”

“A what?” The man retorted.

Hermione wanted to smack herself. How could she expect to deal with a possible attack if she couldn’t order normal food in a Muggle pub? Apparently the exams had worn her down more than she had realized. Recovering her senses, she quickly amended her order. “Just water, please.”

The man glanced at her suspiciously, but nevertheless, filled her order. A few moments later, she was at an empty table mechanically chewing on her food. She could have been eating the worst tasting food imaginable, and not have noticed.

She glanced at her watch. 6:07. The attacks usually began between six and ten. The last one had been at around nine with the one before at eight-thirty. Logic would dictate that the next would be at nine-thirty to ten. But Harry would be clever enough to realize that predictability was bad. Therefore, he would attack early. Maybe. Six had already passed.

Hermione pulled herself from her thoughts and was startled to discover that the food was all gone. Even the water had been drank, though she had not noticed. Before she could sink into her musings again, an explosion rocked the village. Apparently, she was not to be disappointed.

Draco laughed as he watched the Muggles who had only moments ago been going about their day in a peaceful fashion. Now however, now they were running and screaming as they were unsure as to who their attackers were, or what they were being bombarded by.

"Concentrate your attacks on the Muggle houses and shops." Voldemort hissed loudly to the Death Eaters who were clothed in gray instead of their normal black garb. "Count Tratzkaban's forces will be counter-attacking within fifteen minutes at the most. The Ministry in twenty. We must be gone before any Aurors appear."

Draco followed Voldemort through the quaint streets as Death Eaters began to cast loud and explosive curses at houses, and sometimes people. Though Voldemort always enjoyed torturing anybody, pure-blood, half-blood, Death Eater, not Death Eater, or Muggle at any time of the day, he was now refraining as it was more necessary for him to direct the Death Eaters in their own attacks.

Though he was also a Death Eater, Draco was refraining from casting actual curses. Voldemort had ordered him not to cast any magic whatsoever. Malfoy thought that it must be because the Dark Lord suspected that Dumbledore had secretly put tracers on student wands after Potter had been arrested for some reason. Though Draco thought it unlikely, Voldemort was in charge.

However, as they rounded a corner, the opportunity to do more than watch presented itself. An evil grin appeared on the blonde haired Slytherin's face as he cast his eyes on none other than Hermione Granger. "My Lord, I do believe there is someone I should introduce you to."

Hermione pulled her wand from her clothes and made her way out into the street. Hopefully, she could get to Harry before he and his followers disappeared or before she got hurt seriously. As soon as she exited the building, she spotted the gray-cloaked men casting curses everywhere.

They all wore cloaks the same exact color as those Harry and his followers had been wearing during the confrontation after his first attack. Doubts of Harry's guilt immediately fled from her mind. Here was proof.

She summoned her resolve and began to do her best to contain the damage that was being inflicted and to prevent it by fighting the attackers. Her stunners didn't seem to be doing much good though. As soon as one went down, they were immediately revived. It was as if preventing casualties and or captures was their paramount goal rather than to destroy.

Suddenly she heard a voice that chilled her blood and bones. "Hello, Mudblood."

Hermione turned around and came face to face with a smirking Draco Malfoy and the wizard everyone feared. . . Lord Voldemort. "Draco. . . what are you doing here?" she gasped, absolutely horrified.

"Why, ruining Potter's reputation." Draco sneered.

"What do you mean?" Hermione whispered, the truth of Harry's innocence slowly beginning to dawn in her mind.

Voldemort addressed the young man, ignoring Hermione's presence for the most part. "This is the most brilliant witch of your age Draco?" Voldemort asked in disgust. He didn't even wait for a response. "We have no time for this. We shall have to deal with her later."

“L-I-later?” Hermione stuttered?

“Do you honestly think that I can allow you to tell everyone who ‘really’ attacked this village?” Voldemort asked, a hint of disdain in his voice.

Hermione just shook her head, unable to think clearly as scrambled thoughts swam in her mind. Harry, Azkaban, Hogwarts, the Order, the Weasleys, her parents, and Ron. She was so muddled that she didn’t even raise her wand in self-defense as Voldemort hissed a Dark incantation. Her muddled thoughts were completely obliterated as blackness swallowed her whole.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

‘The OWLs are over.’ Ginny thought blissfully, as she woke up and rolled over in her four-poster. Now she faced an important decision. Get out of bed and eat, or sleep in for another hour. Her appetite won out - especially when she reminded herself that breakfast wasn’t served forever.

A few minutes later, she was making her way down the girls’ staircase. She was met in the Common Room by Ron who began to interrogate her.

“Where’s Hermione? Why isn’t she out of bed yet? Is she sick?” This was all spoken by him breathlessly.

Ginny was surprised that Ron had beat Hermione out of bed, nevertheless, she wasn’t worried. Yet. “I’ll go up and find out.” she said before turning around and dashing up the stairs to the sixth year girl dormitory.

When she arrived and entered the room, she was shocked to find that Hermione’s bed had not been slept in and her normally organized school supplies and bag were laying on the floor next to the bed. “Hermione?” she called out pointlessly. There was no answer.

Since none of the other girls were still in bed, Ginny did not opt to remain. She quickly made her way down the stairs. “She’s not up there and her bed doesn’t look like it’s been slept in. Are you sure you don’t know where she is?”

“I’m sure.” Ron said shortly, his voice etched with a hint of worry.

“Let’s ask Lavender or Parvati then.” Ginny suggested, already moving for the portrait hole. “They might have seen her last night or this morning, or at least some sign of her presence.”

Ron quickly followed Ginny out the portrait hole and down the hall. “I passed them on my way back up here. They were going to breakfast.”

With that, the siblings made their way through the castle to the Great Hall, wasting no time but keeping an eye peeled for Hermione at all times. Within record time, they were walking through the doors to the Gryffindor table where Hermione's dorm-mates were sitting with Neville Longbottom.

"When was the last time you saw Hermione?" Ron demanded, getting right into the faces of the girls.

They regarded him coolly, slightly offended at his brisk demand. Finally, Parvati answered. "The History of Magic test. We assumed that she was . . . elsewhere last night." she said, a faint blush blooming on her cheeks as she avoided eye contact with Ron.

Ron's mouth opened angrily, but his response was overridden by Ginny. "We haven't seen her anywhere since about the time you did. We think that she may be missing or something."

"Go to Dumbledore." Neville advised, jumping into the conversation. "I'll organize some students into search parties. We can have the castle canvassed in a half-hour."

"All right then." Ron said, slightly surprised at Neville's calm, collected, and firm instructions. So surprised in fact, that he didn't even think to question the fellow student's leadership. He and Ginny quickly made their way out of the Great Hall.

Parvati and Lavender looked at Neville with worried glances. "She's gone." Lavender said. "I can feel it in my bones. Who do you think did it?"

"I'm not sure what happened or specifically who," Neville stated grimly, "but I know who will be blamed for it."

Neville Longbottom and Cornelius Fudge arrived in Professor Dumbledore's office at the same time to find a calm, but concerned, headmaster and two dejected teenagers. Neville spoke up before the Minister had a chance to say anything. "The castle and grounds have

been searched twice by separate people each time. There is no sign of Hermione anywhere.”

“Excellent work, Mr. Longbottom!” Fudge said, almost gleefully. “Your parents were crack Aurors and it seems like you’re well on your way. If you’ll excuse us though, I need to discuss the events with your headmaster.”

“I’d be glad to.” Neville said, a tinge of sarcasm veiled in his voice. He turned around and left.

As soon as the door closed behind Neville, Dumbledore spoke up. “I assume that the special Portkey issued to Miss Granger had a device to track its use, Cornelius. It would probably be also safe to assume that it was used last night.”

“Yes, indeed.” Fudge replied, helping himself to a chair. “The Portkey was used last night and I’ve already had our Aurors and hit-wizards on the scene to which the Portkey took young Miss Granger. Coincidentally, it was the same location that Potter struck last night.”

Ron leapt up from his own chair, all signs of his depression replaced with fervor. “Did you find her? Is she in St. Mungo’s yet? What was she doing there and what is this special Portkey you’re talking about?”

Feeling guilty about keeping the details from Ron, Ginny interrupted and quickly explained Hermione’s plan to talk to Harry by tracking down what villages he was likely to attack next. When she was finished with what she knew, Dumbledore explained about the Portkey, since he had earlier assumed that Ron had been told.

When Ron was filled in, Dumbledore looked to Fudge who had made himself comfortable with a spot of tea. “What did the Ministry find at the village?”

“Wreckage, fire damage, casualties, and everything Potter usually seems fond of doing,” Fudge commented with a yawn.

“What about Hermione?” Ron asked, seething with frustration.

The Minister of Magic sat back in the chair. “Not a trace of her!” he declared, somewhat excitedly. “The Muggles on site talked about a strange girl who had come to visit the village just before the attack began. As soon as Potter’s forces showed up, she ran into the street.”

“Then what?” Ginny inquired, trying to press Fudge before she lost her patience at the man. He seemed to be drawing out the description for as long as he possibly could.

“Witnesses claim that they saw the leader of the attackers have a short conversation with her.” Fudge informed them smugly.

Dumbledore turned his piercing blue eyes to Fudge. “And then?”

“Potter then used some sort of curse on her which immediately rendered her unconscious. Then they were gone without a trace! Knowing Potter, he’ll want to gloat, which is good for us. As soon as we have her body in custody, I can get the Wizengamot to issue a warrant for his arrest on the charge of murdering a British citizen. Nobody, and I mean nobody, will dare support someone who would murder their former best friend!” Fudge declared smugly.

Ginny gasped very audibly. “Aren’t you going to attempt to rescue her?” Fudge didn’t bother to answer.

Ron who was the resident chess player immediately recognized what Fudge had done. “You deliberately put her in danger from Harry, didn’t you! I bet that you were hoping he would kill her!”

“The greater good must be taken into account.” Fudge said without showing a trace of remorse.

The blue eyes that usually twinkled had now turned to cold ice. “How dare you? What about her family? Who will explain to them why their daughter won’t be coming home at the end of term?”

“I’m sure that they knew very well the risks she was running, being involved in a war where those whose blood is less than pure are targets. Then of course, if you associate yourself with bad people like Potter, what do you expect?”

“Try telling that to any parent, no matter who their child is!” Ginny yelled as tears welled up in her eyes.

Cornelius Fudge rolled his eyes. “That’s what memory charms are for, young lady.”

“We won’t forget!” Ron yelled. He leapt from his chair, drew back his fist, and punched the Minister of Magic in the face. Blood began to immediately spurt from Fudge’s nose. “You can’t just murder Half-Bloods! You’re no better than Harry!”

“Yes, Cornelius. What you have done is extremely serious. I think that you had better leave here.” Dumbledore said coldly.

Fudge shrugged, got up, and left quickly. Though he had left the office in disgrace, he had shown no remorse whatsoever. Ginny observed that he seemed to be more embarrassed about the fact that he had been dismissed by someone he wanted to be better than rather than the fact that he had just sent a sixteen year-old to her almost imminent death.

“Oust him!” Ron yelled loudly. “Have him charged with murder!”

Dumbledore shook his head. “I’m afraid that I can’t do that, Ronald. In all legal technicality, Minister Fudge has done nothing wrong. Hermione did not work for the Ministry nor did he order, direct, or coerce her to put herself in that village.”

“He as good as admitted doing it!” Ginny whispered fiercely.

“Because we can’t touch him.” Dumbledore stated. “If he was in the wrong, he would not have told us his grand scheme. A very clever, but ruthless scheme. I don’t like it, but it may work against Harry.”

Ron shook his head sadly. He even seemed to be on the verge of tears. "I don't like this at all."

"I feel like being alone." Ginny muttered, not wanting to break down in front of her brother, nor wanting to watch him cry. Maybe a little loss would humble him. Or make him more bitter. It didn't matter to Ginny, she had her own thoughts to sort out.

"Let me know if you need anything, Ginevra." Dumbledore said kindly.

"I will." Ginny said shortly as she left the office.

Within several moments, she was in the Owlery, taking comfort in the presence of the many sleeping birds. After several moments she began to cry over Hermione and the general situation. Everything was so wrong! Voldemort killed, Fudge- the Order's ally- killed, Harry killed. Was there anyone who didn't kill?

Alastor Moody was the first who had an opportunity to carry the news to Harry. He did so nervously. After all, how did one break this sort of news to someone? Would Potter mourn for his ex-friend who was now presumed dead, or rejoice? Moody concluded that it solely depended on what sort of person Harry was.

Harry Potter was found in the library perusing a heavy tome. Though he was deeply engrossed in the subject, the entrance of the aged Auror did not escape his attention in the least. "What brings you to my humble home?" Harry inquired with a smile, somewhat glad to have a visitor.

"Not good news, sir." Moody said gruffly.

"It never seems to be." Harry commented, struggling to maintain his cheerfulness, as he marked his place and shut the ponderous book softly. He stood up and met Moody half-way between his table and the entrance. "What do they have me blamed for today?"

Mad-Eye wasted no time in seizing the opening. “The kidnapping and possible murder of Hermione Granger.”

The facade of joviality dropped from Harry’s face in an instant. “Voldemort? How?”

“Apparently Miss Granger had ideas about confronting you during an attack and trying to reason with you.” Moody explained. He then went on to explain all the details of the special Portkey and Fudge’s manipulations. When the Auror was finished explaining, he silently watched as Harry made his way to a nearby chair and sat down in it heavily.

“Thank you for telling me, Alastor.” Harry said quietly. “I suppose that you have other things that you need to get to, rather than to watch me mope.”

“Don’t mourn the death of a traitor so deeply, son.” Moody said, trying to lessen the burden that Harry was experiencing. “Besides, we don’t even know if she’s dead yet. For all you know they could turn her lose.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, Voldemort could and possibly would do that. That could be just as bad though, and even though she was a traitor, I can’t help but feel sorrow.”

“Don’t let it get to you then.” Moody said. He then silently withdrew and made his way home.

The Count of Trazkaban immediately answered the summons of the Earl of the North. The ring he wore that was connected to both Lord Polairix and Queen Xerina led him to the library in the Fortress of Nair’icaix. “You called, my lord?”

“Yes, I did.” Harry said. “What do you know about the attack Voldemort conducted last night?”

Hiscophney shrugged. “Next to nothing. Representatives of the British Ministry were swarming all over the village by the time we

arrived. I decided that it would be best to leave them to their job. May I ask why you're interested?"

Harry quickly explained the situation to the count. "Is there any way that we can perhaps rescue her or find out whether or not she's dead?"

"I'm afraid that would be impossible, my lord." Hiscophney said, doing his best to sound consoling- which was rather difficult since he had not had much practice. "We have no idea where Lord Voldemort's base of operations is and whether or not the girl is being held prisoner there or elsewhere. Even if we did, any decent Dark lord would have it under charms that would be quite difficult to penetrate."

"And if we tried anyway, we may force Voldemort's hand." Harry concluded before Hiscophney could move onto that aspect. "Thank you for coming, I'll let you return to what you were occupied with previously."

"Good night, my lord." Hiscophney said with a small bow, before departing.

Feeling weak and powerless, Harry let out a deep sigh and then uttered a silent prayer, hoping for the best for all parties concerned. Nearly three days later, Hermione finally woke up from her magically induced slumber and discovered she was tied down on something hard in pitch-blackness. Immediately, she could sense that important facts were missing from her memory- such as how it was that she had been knocked out and put wherever she now was.

As if looking for a missing possession, she retraced her steps in her mind. She had left the History test, gone to her dormitory, used the special Portkey to get to the village, and rushed out into the street when the attack began. Hermione could not remember anything after that.

Abruptly, one thought came to her mind. Harry was innocent! She couldn't remember how she knew or how it was that he was innocent, but she knew with an absolute surety that he was indeed innocent.

Immediately, Hermione was overpowered by an immense wave of guilt. If he was innocent, that meant that she had betrayed him. How could she have been so stupid!

An answer came to her fairly quickly. It was because she was a bad friend. Even the dumbest Hufflepuff would have stuck by Harry's side through such accusations against his character. Too bad he didn't really have any friends from Hufflepuff. They would have served him better.

With these thoughts overwhelming her, Hermione began to cry bitter tears. Harry Potter had been one of her first true friends in life. There had been none before Hogwarts. For five and a half years, she had luxuriated in the knowledge that she could depend on friends and could tell others she had friends.

Then what had she done? Thrown one of her most valuable friends away like a piece of trash. Not only had she hurt him, but also she had hurt herself. Accusing him of being a murderer like the killer of his parents was possibly the worse she had done, even worse than betraying him in the first place.

What should she do now? What could she do? Hermione immediately resolved to make it up somehow. She would have to try to counter the damage that her actions had done. Then maybe she could try to win his friendship back even if it took forever.

As the time passed, Hermione calmed herself by thinking of way to reverse her wrongdoing. Fudge and others would have to be told Ron must be convinced of the truth, as hard as it would be. The public would have to be told of her idiocy, even if it cost her reputation.

At some point, Hermione finally began to turn her thoughts outward. Where was she and how had she gotten here? If the village had been attacked, and it wasn't Harry, then she must be a prisoner of Voldemort.

Hermione tentatively attempted to move, even though she knew that she was tied down. Much to her relief, her hands were free enough to move a little. After feeling around a bit, she was able to determine that she was on a table of some sort.

Before she could began to wonder why she was tied to a table, a door opened. Instinctively she froze as two pairs of footsteps approached her in the dark.

A quiet voice hissed some sort of incantation and with dread, Hermione felt the ability to control her muscles sap away. Her vast knowledge of spells revealed to her that she had been hit with a highly illegal spell. The victim of the spell could hear, feel, see, taste, and smell- but not move. Death Eaters used it before raping or torturing their victims.

Hermione braced herself for the worse. However, the two people had other intentions. They used another spell to levitate her limp form into what seemed to be a long box.

With a thud, a lid was slammed on and Hermione heard the noise of a hammer at work. It was then that she realized the box was a coffin. Apparently they planned to bury her alive.

The instant the curse that held Hermione physically powerless wore off, Hermione let out an inhuman shriek and began to pound, push, and scratch at the lid that held her in the coffin.

Draco Malfoy watched Voldemort levitate the simple wooden coffin and then set it down in front of the Hogwarts gates. It landed with a loud thud.

An evil smirk passed over his face as the Mudblood inside began to scream and pound on the coffin's lid from the inside. The thud after several minutes of levitation had convinced her that she was now in a dug grave. If there had been any loose dirt nearby, he would have thrown some of it on the lid.

Without wasting another moment, Voldemort signaled Draco to Portkey back to the base. When the Portkey had done its job, Draco found himself in the lab where Hermione had been held. A moment later, Voldemort arrived via Apparition.

“I’m not sure I understand why we returned her to Hogwarts bearing the knowledge of Potter’s innocence.” Draco commented as humbly as he could, hoping for an explanation.

“She doesn’t know ‘how’ Potter is innocent, neither can she explain who abducted her.” Voldemort explained, to pleased with his handiwork to be offended at Draco’s remark. “Dumbledore will immediately assume that Potter altered her mind. Even the girl will eventually have to admit that she was mistaken concerning Potter’s innocence.

“I see.” Draco said.

Chapter 30

The 10,000 Word Extravaganza Chapter

Snape was already in a surly mood that night. Upon his arrival at the apothecary in Hogsmeade on his way back from Diagon Alley, where he had spent the night, he had discovered that the apprentice who had taken his special order the week before had gotten it wrong. Idiot! What was he supposed to do with a barrel of frog tongues? Nothing! That was what.

Now he was on his way back to Hogwarts Castle to report the latest Death Eater activities to Dumbledore and to finish putting his potion labs in order for the summer holiday. He was so intent on reaching the castle that was now in sight, that he failed to watch where he was going.

The esteemed Potion master's mood got worse when he tripped over something. Cursing, he picked himself up and examined the obstacle in the road. A coffin! What jerk left a coffin in the middle of the road for people to trip over? Didn't they cost enough to prevent people from carelessly leaving them lying around?

His angry oaths were cut short when noises of distress started to come from the coffin. To Snape, that meant two things. One: someone was inside the coffin and his tripping over it had alerted whoever it was to his presence, and two: it was a used coffin. Those were usually a bit cheaper than new ones, and slightly illegal.

Cautiously, Snape pulled his wand from his cloak and pointed it at the coffin. For all he knew, the coffin could be a dangerous trap or a practical joke courtesy of the Weasley twins. Same thing.

One simple spell later, the nails holding the coffin shut were gone and the lid abruptly popped off to reveal a very distressed Hermione Granger who immediately sat up and locked her gaze on Snape. "Professor! I'm so glad you're here!"

Snape looked at Hermione with shock. Both Harry and Dumbledore had written her off for dead- Dumbledore two days ago and Harry just

that morning. Fudge had filed an indictment accusing Harry Potter of capital murder the day before for all the good that it would do. "How did you get here, Granger?"

"They locked me in the coffin and took me here, Professor." Hermione said, bursting into tears. "I thought for sure that they were going to bury me alive!"

"Well, we can't have that, now can we?" Snape said snidely. Potter had been very concerned about her disappearance. Personally, if he were Potter, he would have felt that it was good riddance.

Hermione looked at Snape reproachfully. "You could be a little more polite to a female in distress, Professor."

"Whatever." Snape growled. "Get up and I'll take you to the castle. Professor Dumbledore has already sent your things along to your parents due to the end of term."

The mention of Dumbledore seemed to startle Hermione as she stiffly stood up, stretched, and stepped out of the wooden box. Before Snape could ask what she was thinking, she spoke. "Yes, we must get to the castle! Harry is innocent and I have to tell everyone before they alienate him any further than they already have!"

"I don't know if it's humanly possible to accomplish that." Snape said sarcastically as they slowly made their way to Hogwarts. When they arrived, they found that Filch was the only person at the castle for the night.

Feeling very much put upon, Snape escorted Hermione to the Hospital wing which seemed rather empty without Madam Pomfrey and had Hermione lay down in one of the beds. He left her there for fifteen minutes in order to retrieve some sleeping potions from the dungeons.

When he returned, he found that she had taken the initiative to change into a hospital gown. He had not thought of that. It was a good thing she had though, Madam Pomfrey would have had his

head for such a misdemeanor. "Drink these." he commanded, setting two vials on the bedside stand.

"What are they?"

"One mild sleeping potion and one 'soothing' potion." Snape answered, slightly miffed that he was being questioned. "They'll help you get a good night's rest and will hopefully calm your nerves."

She took the two vials from the stand and drank the contents of each. Within minutes, she had fallen into a deep slumber. Snape watched with his cold dark eyes until he was sure that the potions had taken their full effect.

What he had told her was essentially true, aside from the fact that the sleeping potion was stronger than even the Dreamless Sleep Potion and therefore not classified as 'mild.' The other potion 'did' soothe, but it also added strength and order to memories. That potion was commonly used on distraught witnesses in criminal trials.

Now that she was held firmly in the grasp of both Potions, he could summon Professor Dumbledore and possibly the Minister. The facts that those potions had been administered almost immediately after she had been discovered and that she had talked to only to Snape would add strength to whatever she told everyone when she woke up.

If all went well, she could back up her earlier statement that Harry was innocent. Now that she was safe, his job was to immediately notify Dumbledore and the proper authorities. Any more delay on his part could ruin the integrity of her testimony, especially considering his past connections with the Death Eaters.

Filch was left stationed in the Hospital wing with Nearly Headless Nick as Snape left the castle and journeyed for London where Dumbledore and the Ministry were. He sighed regretfully as he realized that Harry would be unhappy at not being the first to know of her return considering that he had been the last to give up on her. He would know eventually though, he might even be considered innocent by then too.

Hermione felt herself wake up very slowly. The first thought that crossed her mind was that the sleeping potion must have been stronger than Snape had claimed. She was too tired to feel outraged.

Her mind slowly regained its conscious functions and within seconds, the memory that Harry was innocent crossed her mind. All traces of the potion's effect dissolved as a spurt of adrenaline shot through her system. Her droopy eyelids flew open to find several people standing around her bed in the Hospital wing.

On one side of the bed, Professor Dumbledore stood looking at her cheerfully. On the other side, Ron was standing there and looking overjoyed. The look on Ron's face made Hermione's heart skip a beat. He was a git a lot of the time, but a loveable one.

Also grouped around the bed were Ron's parents, sister, and the twins. Madam Bones, the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, stood behind Dumbledore with a slightly confused expression painted on her face and Hermione was quite sure that she could see Minister Fudge holding back behind the crowd.

"How long have I been asleep?" she asked.

"All night and a good part of the day as well, Miss Granger." Dumbledore stated. "You've been missing for quite a while as well. Do you remember what happened?"

The phrase 'Harry is innocent' immediately popped up in her mind, but then so did some memories that had not been there earlier. The memories detailing the attack on the village and the presence of Malfoy and Voldemort.

"V-V-Voldemort attacked the village I went to." Hermione explained eagerly. "Draco Malfoy was with him and they kidnapped me. Before they knocked me out, Malfoy told me that they were there to ruin Harry's reputation. Harry is innocent!"

The reactions to Hermione's statements were varied. Ginny's face lost all trace of color and she nearly fainted before silently steadying herself with the help of a nearby bed. The twins grinned, Ron looked at her with a confused expression, Mrs. Weasley's eyes flared with disbelief, Mr. Weasley avoided looking at her, and Madam Bones looked from her to Dumbledore who was studying Hermione with concerned eyes, his upheld hand preventing a livid Fudge from saying anything.

"How did they 'knock you out?'" Dumbledore inquired quietly as everyone in the room kept silent and watched Dumbledore and Hermione quietly. The only one not particularly interested in the conversation were Ginny and the twins. Ginny was too busy trying to stop herself from hyperventilating and the twins seemed to think the rest of her statement to be irrelevant.

"With some sort of spell." Hermione replied. "I think it was Dark."

"What happened between that and your discovery by Professor Snape?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. I woke up and then some people put me into the coffin and transported the coffin to where Snape found it."

"Did you see who specifically put you into the coffin?"

"No." Hermione said, shaking her head.

Dumbledore seemed to consider his next question carefully. "Could you remember the details about the attack on the village when Snape found you?"

Frustration welled up in Hermione. "What does that have to do with anything! Harry is innocent and you can't waste any more time dawdling around."

"Please answer the question, Miss Granger."

"No, the only thing I could remember was that Harry is innocent." Hermione said with a deep sigh.

Before Dumbledore could ask another question, Snape and Moody entered the wing. "The team couldn't find anything." Moody reported. He then shot an unreadable face at Minister Fudge. "If they had been able to come sooner, I suspect that they would have been able to find more evidence."

"It's all right, Alastor." Dumbledore said calmly. "I did not expect that the Ministry team would find anything that could reveal who put Miss Granger's coffin where Severus found it."

This didn't seem to do much in the way of consoling Moody however. He seemed rather disappointed at the lack of results. Before he could reply, Mrs. Weasley cut into the conversation. "Potter obviously did it! We need to worry about Hermione now. He's tampered with her mind! She thinks he's innocent."

"He is innocent!" Hermione yelled. She looked at them all. The twins seemed sympathetic while Ginny was too deep in shock to respond to anything. Realizing that she would just get the same reactions from them all, Hermione looked to the newcomers. Mad-Eye Moody's face was expressionless as he studied Minister Fudge and Snape was merely looking at her, his eyes locked on hers.

Suddenly Hermione got an overwhelming sensation that Snape believed her. However, when she attempted to speak to him, she found that her mouth would not open. What was going on? Dumbledore began to speak and as Snape looked away, Hermione felt her ability to speak return.

"Arguing will get us nowhere." Dumbledore announced. "Would you allow me to perform some tests on your mind, Miss Granger?"

"Go ahead." Hermione responded, too mystified at Snape's actions to really care about anything else. He must have done 'something' to her. Was it possible that he used Legillimency on her?

Professor Dumbledore pulled out his wand and muttered some complicated incantations. Hermione felt an array of strange sensations in her mind as he performed the spells. Hopefully, his tests would prove that Harry was indeed innocent.

However, when he finished the last spell, the professor's face was grave. "I fear that you have been somehow deceived, Miss Granger."

Hermione's mouth dropped open and she was ready to protest, but Dumbledore held up his hand to silence her and continued explaining his findings. "The memories you now have in your brain have been planted somehow. Based on the results of the spell, I'd say that your mind was wiped at some point and then the memories of Voldemort, Draco, and Harry's innocence were later put into your head."

For some irrational reason, Hermione's eyes clouded up and she felt a tear make its way down her face. "But he's innocent, Professor! You have to believe me!"

"I wish I could, Miss Granger." Dumbledore said.

She then looked to the other members of the room for some support. She first looked to Snape who she was sure believed her, but he looked away. Next, she looked at Ron. He seemed to be torn between hatred of Harry and supporting his girlfriend in her apparent insanity. She skipped over Ginny who obviously believed Hermione too much. Hermione wasn't sure if Ginny was even listening anymore. The rest of the occupants of the room either looked away or gave glances that supported Dumbledore.

"But you have to believe me!" Hermione cried out wretchedly.

"Calm down, Miss Granger." Bones instructed in a rather neutral voice. "We don't have to solve this right now. I would appreciate it if you would give me a statement concerning how you got to the village from where you were kidnapped though." Bones said as she gave Fudge a sideways glance.

Hermione spent the next few minutes explaining how she had gotten to the village with the help of the special Portkey that Minister Fudge had provided upon hearing of her proposal to track Harry down and talk some sense into him. Her account was met with more than one raised eyebrow.

For some reason that was unfathomable to Hermione, Fudge seemed rather flustered at her account. This confused her. Why would he be flustered? It was the truth! She finished up her account rather curtly. “I hope you’ll believe that at least.”

“Professor Dumbledore is a witness.” Madame Bones said rather emotionlessly. “This matter bears looking into. I thank you for the information that you’ve provided.” The Ministry official turned her attention to the others present in the room. “If you’ll excuse me, I have some pressing business to attend to.” Bones then left the Hospital wing, followed several minutes later by Fudge.

After that, no one really said anything until Professor Dumbledore spoke up. “There’s nothing to be done at this point. Since you seem to be in good health, Miss Granger, I’ll arrange for you to be transported to your home tomorrow. For now, why don’t you get some more rest?”

“I will, Professor.” Hermione yawned, surprised that she was still tired.

With that, everyone began to file out of the room each bidding her good night until Professor Snape was the only remaining person in the room. He stopped and looked at Hermione with calculating eyes.

“Harry is innocent, isn’t he?” Hermione asked in a voice that bordered on desperate pleading.

Snape nodded. “He is, Miss Granger.”

Although Snape was the last person in the world whom Hermione would suspect of believing Harry innocent in some situation, she was

vastly relieved to hear that he believed in Harry's innocence. "Is there anyone else who believes?"

"Yes."

"Who?" Hermione inquired eagerly, her near state of exhaustion nearly forgotten.

Unfortunately for Hermione, the Potions master was not forthcoming. "I'm not really sure that I should say, Miss Granger. Mr. Potter does not want those loyal to him to be compromised."

"But I already know about you." Hermione pointed out sulkily.

"Yes, you do," Snape whispered eerily, "and if you tell anyone else, you'll curse the day that you received your Hogwarts letter. I don't take betrayal as lightly as others might. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal." Hermione said, feeling quite frightened but also realizing that Snape was in a dangerous position. Betrayal of his loyalties to an Order member, Death Eater, or both could prove disastrous for him.

Snape turned from Hermione and made his way to the door and exited, saying only one word. "Good."

The Weasleys and Professor Dumbledore adjoined to the latter's office to discuss Hermione's situation. No one spoke until they were all seated in the office and enjoying some tea and biscuits that had been graciously conjured up by Dumbledore.

"Will there be any permanent damage to her mind?" Ron inquired.

Dumbledore shook his head negatively. "No, there will not be. As of now, her mind is functioning in a normal manner. The only problem stems from that fact that someone has planted some false memories into her mind. Other than that, she's just fine, though perhaps a little distraught over being locked in a coffin for a day."

“What I want to know,” Mrs. Weasley stated, “is where Potter learned how to alter memories and mess with people’s mind like that. I also want to know how vulnerable we are to attacks of that nature from him.”

“He must have picked up some Dark magic.” Mr. Weasley mused uncomfortably.

Dumbledore shook his head. “No, whoever planted those memories did so with skill and finesse. Harry has not had time to refine his skills with something that is so new to him and so very delicate. You’re forgetting his wife, Bellatrix.”

“She must have done it!” Ron exclaimed.

“I forgot about her.” Arthur Weasley said slowly. “I imagine that she is very skilled in that area. Perhaps Harry hasn’t learned Dark magic. Fred, George? What do you think?”

Both of the twins shrugged and Fred spoke up. “I’m not entirely sure that Hermione’s mind ‘was’ altered. Is it possible that you’re mistaken, Professor?”

“No, I’m not mistaken.” Dumbledore said firmly but kindly. “It is very clear that information was planted in her memory.”

“Perhaps too clear.” George interjected.

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes and sighed all at the same time, making an impressive, if not pathetic display of emotions. “Let’s not get into conspiracy theories.”

Fred and George were silenced, but they both shot reproachful glances at their mother who was seemingly oblivious to them. There was an uncomfortable pause in the conversation as no one wanted to interfere with a disagreement between a mother and children.

Arthur Weasley took it upon himself to move things along a bit. "All right, let us assume that Hermione was kidnapped by Harry who then arranged for her memory to be altered. What was the purpose?"

"To fool us into believing in his innocence of course." Ron blurted out angrily as he violently chewed on a biscuit.

"Well it sure worked." Fred declared sarcastically.

"He underestimated us then!" Ron retorted.

"Oh please!" George muttered.

"Show some respect for your brother!" Mrs. Weasley snarled at George and slightly to Fred.

Abruptly, Dumbledore stood up from his desk. "That's enough!" Everyone stared at him, except for Ginny who seemed to be oblivious to the entire conversation. Dumbledore then continued in a voice that brooked no opposition or objections. "We will assume that Harry had a purpose in what he did that may have extended beyond convincing us of his supposed innocence."

"All right." Mr. Weasley said agreeably.

Dumbledore sat down and then continued. "Miss Granger's health appears to be normal. However, it is entirely possible that there is something that has gone unnoticed. If Harry was able to alter her mind, or have it altered, he may have established a link with her that would allow him to spy on us."

Mrs. Weasley who had seemingly regained her calm spoke up. "Is there a way to reverse that, Professor?"

"It is very hard to undo magic that has to do with someone's mind if a different wizard or witch did the original magic." Dumbledore responded. "If we frustrate Harry though, he may withdraw from her mind or end whatever curse or spell that Hermione may be subject to. Therefore, I am sending Miss Granger home tomorrow where she'll

remain until school resumes. We must keep her out of Order business and away from the wizarding world as long as we can."

"How do we explain to her why we're keeping her at arm's length?" Mr. Weasley asked.

"We'll just tell her that she may still be suffering from side-effects of her kidnapping." Dumbledore answered.

Fred and George simultaneous snorted. "She'll buy that all right." It was extremely late when the Weasleys returned to Grimmauld Place via special Portkey. They all promptly scattered to their various places in the household. Mrs. Weasley to the kitchen to get a late snack, Mr. Weasley upstairs, and the twins to their lab.

Their departure left Ginny standing in the entrance hall on the point of collapse. After realizing that she was alone and free from involvement with others, she decided to go up to her room. At this thought, a wave of nausea passed over her. It wasn't her room. It wasn't her house. It was Harry's house. They had betrayed him and taken it from him.

As Ginny trudged up the stairs, she contemplated as to whether or not her family members would have similar reactions when they realized that Harry was indeed innocent. This led to thoughts about whether or not they'd ever be convinced which eventually led to Ginny reexamining her own acknowledgment of his innocence.

After all, Dumbledore had explained away Hermione's declaration of Harry's innocence. That wasn't good enough for Ginny though. The instant that Hermione had said that Harry was innocent, Ginny had felt the truth of it in her gut. It was a truth and by some virtue of either her inborn magic or connection to Harry from the Chamber of Secrets, she could not deny it.

All too soon, the open door to her room appeared and Ginny went in and shut the door behind her. Mechanically, she traded her clothes for a nightdress and then stationed herself in front of a mirror to stare at herself in it. What to do now?

Section break

Early the next morning, Hermione was roused from her slumber in the Hospital wing and prepared for her late return to her parent's house. Professor McGonagall wasted no time in getting Hermione dressed and cleaned up.

Hermione who was now completely recovered and no longer suffering from lack of sleep had settled into a rut of guilt concerning Harry. As McGonagall handed her a Portkey, instructed her on its use and then reminded Hermione that the ban on underage magic had been lifted for those entering their seventh year in September, a familiar quote ran through Hermione's mind. 'If you want to change the world, start with yourself.'

"Thank you, Professor." Hermione said mechanically. If she expected everyone to realize that Harry was innocent and reconcile themselves with him, she would have to do so first. She had the innocence part pegged, now for reconciliation.

With a nod for McGonagall, she activated the Portkey and found herself standing on her front doorstep. Wards had been erected at some prior point in time that prevented magical transportation in her house. Since the door was locked, she had to knock.

The door was thrown open and Hermione found herself in the warm embrace of her mom and then her dad. "We were so scared when you weren't on the train, honey!" Her mom said quickly. "We got a letter from your professor stating that you had been delayed and would be home shortly though. Welcome home!"

"It's good to be home." Hermione said, doing her best to put on a good face for her parents.

"We tried to get the day off," Mr. Granger said, "but we have too many appointments to cancel today and we weren't sure if you would be here yet. Can you look after yourself for the day?"

"Of course." Hermione said quietly, inwardly relieved that she would not have to deal with her parents as she thought about her issue concerning Harry.

Her parents who were already prepared to leave for the day bid her a quick good-bye and soon left her alone in the house. Hermione aimlessly wandered around the house. When she passed through her bedroom, she found that her trunk had been sent ahead. In the kitchen she found some leftover breakfast. It tasted like ashes.

Eventually, she settled down on a chair in the room that contained her family's collection of literature. The books surrounding her normally gave her comfort, but no longer. Thoughts of Harry immediately arose and Hermione found herself considering ways in which she could possibly reconcile herself with Harry.

She had turned her back on him and he was undoubtedly hurt and betrayed. Any ties of friendship that she had shared with him were now severed. Hermione was suddenly overwhelmed with desperation to bring back that friendship. How could she do it though? How could she win back what she had carelessly thrown away?

Something dug into Hermione's thigh and she shifted uncomfortably. Finding that it was no good, Hermione squirmed a bit and dug the uncomfortable object from her pocket. It was the Portkey that Fudge had given her. As Hermione stared at it, an idea formed in her head. She could go to Harry.

Adrenaline coursed through Hermione's veins as she leapt up. She would go to Harry and do whatever it took to win back their friendship. Not wasting a single second, Hermione found her wand, which she could use legally, and a book that she had bought that addressed magical transportation.

She already had a Ministry Portkey, the only thing that she would have to do would be to alter the destination of the Portkey a little. The next hour or so was spent by Hermione reading and rereading through the chapter of the book that dealt with setting a Portkey's destination.

There did not appear to be any standard way to alter a destination, but Hermione was fairly sure that she could pull it off, considering the fact that the Portkey was programmed to go to multiple destinations at the user's will. Adding another destination would probably not be much of a problem.

Once she felt ready to perform the necessary magic and had decided what she was going to do with the Portkey, Hermione placed it on her kitchen table and then proceeded to make the alterations that she hoped would lead her to where Harry was.

The Order believed him to be residing on an island somewhat north of Azkaban. If she set the Portkey for land only, and then if she got the general area correct, she would land on Harry's island or whatever he was living in or on.

Within a very short few minutes, the Portkey was complete. Even for Hermione's known skill and ability to learn magic quickly that was remarkable. Too remarkable. Unfortunately, there was only one way to test its reliability and that was to simply use it.

Hermione awkwardly pocketed her wand and then left a note for her parents explaining that she had decided to go on a rather important outing and that she would most likely be back soon. She left the note where it would be immediately found when her parents returned home and returned to the table on which the altered Portkey lay.

Apprehensively, Hermione stepped closer to the table and reached out her hand toward the Portkey. Thinking about going to Harry and begging for forgiveness was one thing; actually doing it was another. How would he react?

Realizing that she was asking questions that could not be answered, Hermione sighed and grabbed up the Portkey quickly. It activated immediately and Hermione felt a very familiar jerk around her navel as it carried her away.

A moment later when Hermione expected to feel the jerky landing that Portkeys provided, she instead felt what resembled a magical

collision with something. Wards! To say the least, Hermione was shocked. How was it that Harry had protected his location with wards powerful enough to repel Portkeys? Not even Hogwarts could really do that!

The next thought that came through Hermione's mind was concerning the reaction of Anti-Portkey wards to an invader. What did they do? No one knew since no one was powerful enough to try it out.

Her question was answered when a heartbeat after the crash, she felt herself bouncing backwards, if you could call it that. There was no real sense of direction while in limbo between one Portkey destination and another.

Finally, the jerky landing arrived in a much more violent form. Hermione felt most of her strength drain from her as she was tossed onto a surface made of coarse stone. As she landed, the Portkey was projected from her hands and it slid away from her. A faint splash was then heard. Weakly, Hermione stood up and looked to where the Portkey had gone. It had fallen off the edge of the stone surface and into some water below.

It appeared that she had landed on some sort of antique stone dock. The stone appeared to be quite ancient as evidenced by carvings and symbols that were now all but eroded away by the waves of the sea that constantly seemed to be crashing against the pillars that held the dock up.

A bird flew overhead and Hermione looked up and turned around to follow its progress. It soon flew from sight and her eyes fell downward. What she saw next disturbed her greatly. It was a great big fortress and as Hermione studied it, she felt a dreadful sensation. There were Dementors in that building. With that, the identity of her location assailed her. The wards around where Harry was hiding had repelled her to Azkaban.

Hermione gulped and looked around for any sign of human life. There was none whatsoever. That was to be expected of course. Hadn't the Ministry been evicted from the island by Harry? Maybe some of

Harry's followers were here. Deciding that it was worth a go, Hermione started walking up the dock toward the land.

Within a few feet of walking, Hermione came to a small part of the dock that had not been eroded away. It was a circular seal with a one foot diameter. It depicted . . . something. Though the relief was as sharp as the day it had been carved, Hermione could not make it out.

Shrugging, Hermione decided to continue walking. However, the instant she crossed over the seal, some sort of power seized Hermione. She was instantly reminded of the body bind curse and expected to fall flat on her face. This was not to be the case however as whatever power that had assailed her chose to keep her frozen upright. Any further thought was cut off when the power pressed in upon her mind and froze everything.

After what seemed like hours, the force let Hermione go and she sighed with relief at her escape from whatever power had held her. The relief was a bit premature however. The 'power' assailed her again and instead of freezing her, it chucked her off the dock and into the ocean.

Hermione let out a bloodcurdling scream before smacking the water and performing a perfect belly-flop. This immediately knocked the already exhausted Hermione unconscious as an abnormally large wave blanketed her.

"You're just in time for a spot of lunch!" Harry declared heartily to Neville who had just arrived at Nair'icaix via one of Harry's special Portkey's. "Sit down and we'll arrange to have a plate made up for you."

Neville looked around the simple but elegant dining room and spotted Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Harry's two assistants sitting at the table. Harry had stood up and traversed the room to greet him. "I would hate to intrude." Neville responded politely. "Gran made me eat before I departed for here anyway."

Bellatrix shot him a knowing and slightly apprehensive smile. She was still uncomfortable around him due to his parent's condition. "I know about teenage boys." she said, glancing at Harry with a broader

smile, "There's always room for some more food. Besides, you need something to keep the prune juice down with."

Everyone at the table snickered and/or smiled as Neville blushed faintly. "Thank you, milady." he said, seating himself at the table as Harry did likewise next to Bellatrix. He turned his attention directly to Harry as a plate loaded with food appeared before him. "I have some good news for you from Professor Snape. He would have come himself, but there were some engagements that he could not escape today."

"We have some good news too!" Harry said brightly, sharing a look with Bellatrix.

Neville decided to shove his own news aside for a moment. "What is it?"

"I'm pregnant." Bellatrix announced to Neville in a very demure voice. Apparently she was unsure as to what those who had known Harry before she had would think.

To say that Neville was shocked would be a bit of an understatement. He had not graduated from Hogwarts yet and one of his former classmates was already starting a family! "T-that's wonderful!" Neville exclaimed as he thought about what everyone else that Harry knew would say to that sort of news. "Do you know whether or not it's going to be a boy or a girl?"

"Not yet." Harry responded.

Before Neville could ask when they could find out, Bellatrix spoke up. "There are spells that can reveal that once I get further into the nine-months, but Harry and I have decided to just wait until the baby comes to find out. It'll be a surprise that way."

"Have you thought of any names?" Neville asked with a smile.

"Not really." Harry said as he finished off his lunch. "Narcissa has come up with plenty though."

Narcissa beamed, seemingly more from Harry's casual and friendly acknowledgment of her rather than from the situation that her sister was in. "If it's a boy, they should name him James Harrison Potter. That would carry on the Potter line sufficiently. Harrison because Harry just doesn't sound right as a middle name. Then if it's a girl, Bellatrix or Lily of course!"

"Those sound like good names." Neville commented positively.

Bellatrix frowned. "James Harrison sounds fine, but I refuse to name a daughter after me. It would create too much confusion."

"Perhaps Isabella or Belle would be close enough but not the same." Neville suggested.

"Perfect!" Narcissa declared.

"Let's not get too excited." Bellatrix said in a dignified voice that hid her enthusiasm for the subject. Her sparkling violet eyes gave her away though.

Harry smiled at the two sisters and then looked at Neville. "I'm sure that you didn't come here to discuss potential names for my child. What's the good news from Snape?"

"Hermione has been found alive." Neville declared.

A grin graced Harry's face. "That's wonderful! She has put herself against me, but I'm still glad that she's alive." Harry's expression then took on a slightly saddened look. "Perhaps she'll still come around . . . wait. Voldemort kidnapped her so logically, she would know that I'm innocent, wouldn't she?"

Neville nodded. "Precisely. The instant she woke up, she told everyone that you were innocent. Bu-"

"Did they believe her?" Harry interrupted anxiously as everyone else awaited what Neville would next say.

“I’m sorry.” Neville said, trying to break the bad part of the news as gently as possible. “Voldemort altered her mind somewhat and made it appear that her genuine memories of what happened were false.”

Harry restrained himself to shaking his head sadly.

“Snape said that she still believes that you’re innocent.” Neville put in hopefully. “They haven’t convinced her that you’re still guilty yet. Maybe there’s hope at least for her believing you.”

“We’ll just have to see.” Bellatrix said, trying to keep the air from getting too depressing.

Neville reached for his goblet of punch and sipped it thoughtfully. “Yes, that’s what we’ll just have to do. While I was here, I was hoping that I could discuss the details for altering Potter’s Legion a bit and then I hoped that I could visit my parents for a bit.”

“Let’s visit your parents first.” Harry suggested as he rose from the table, everyone following suit out of respect for him.

“I’ll go along as well.” Bellatrix declared. “I’ve done a little research into their conditions since they came here. We could talk about that.”

Neville, Harry, and Bellatrix then left the room, leaving the others to either finish their lunch or remain and chat with the others. They made small talk on the way up to the room in which the Longbottoms were being kept.

When they arrived in the room, Neville made a beeline straight toward the twin beds that the Longbottoms now resided in. He sat down in the gap that lay between the two beds and began to talk to his parents, alternating between one and the other. Harry was cheered somewhat by the fact that they seemed more responsive to him than usual.

Harry and Bellatrix held back, not wanting to interfere with the close and precious family moments that were occurring for Neville. Harry

could most certainly relate to his friend. Even if his own parents were basically vegetables, he would still treasure every moment spent with them.

The sight of Neville talking in earnest to the almost completely non-responsive couple in the beds seemed to sadden Bellatrix. Harry could well understand why this was. In an attempt to comfort her, Harry unconsciously conjured a couch, pulled Bellatrix down onto it, and snuggled up to her with his arm around her.

“I don’t think he blames you directly.” Harry said quietly.

“He should.” Bellatrix whispered.

Harry shrugged, not quite sure what there was to say that could comfort his wife.

“If anyone ever turned us into vegetables like that and forced our child to go through the emotional distress brought on by something like that, I’d kill them multiple times and make them suffer. I helped do that to a child.” Bellatrix informed Harry.

“I think that you’ve redeemed yourself.” Harry replied, quietly considering what would happen in the event that Frank and Alice Longbottom woke up and recovered from the debilitated state. How would they react to the fact that one of their torturers and enemies had gone and married the child of James and Lily? Probably not very well at all.

Bellatrix shook her head. “To redeem oneself, one must try to fix the wrong if at all possible. That’s impossible for those I killed, but the Longbottoms just lie there waiting for me to do something.”

“I guess that does weigh heavily.” Harry said.

There was no response from Bellatrix because a new thought had just occurred to her. In order to be redeemed, she needed to right the wrong. To do that, she would have to make it so that the Longbottoms could recover. The cure lay with her.

Harry could feel Bellatrix suddenly freeze and he instinctively knew that this signified some sort of realization. Before he could ask what it was, Bellatrix spoke slowly. "In order for one to gain redemption, they have to right the wrong, correct?"

"I would think so." Harry mused.

"But that wouldn't be enough though, would it?"

"It might be nice if they were sorry for doing it in the first place." Harry said idly. "If someone were to steal something but then give it back only because they were forced to I guess they wouldn't really be redeemed."

"Sorrow!" Bellatrix exclaimed loudly, startling everyone in the room. She even received a moment of attention from the comatose Longbottoms. "That's it! Sorrow and healing."

Neville looked at Bellatrix strangely and then questioningly at Harry. After seeing that Harry was just as confused as he was, Neville looked back at Bellatrix. "What's it?"

"Sorrow." Bellatrix declared.

Deciding that he had spent enough time with his parents, Neville left their side and joined Harry and Bellatrix. "You said earlier that you did some research." Neville said, addressing Bellatrix. "Did you find anything useful?"

"Not really." Bellatrix said, waving her hand in a dismissive manner. "It's all obsolete anyhow. I have a new idea that I think could very likely prove to be the thing that brings your parents back to the land of the sane and living."

Neville could not help but be a little skeptical. The Healers at St. Mungo's had presented he and his Gran with new ideas for treatments constantly. Eventually they had all began to sound the

same and have the same effect on Frank and Alice Longbottom. No effect whatsoever. "What is it?" he finally asked.

"I don't want to say quite yet." Bellatrix replied, doing her best to look Neville in the eye. "But I'll need your help and especially Harry's support to do it. Would you be willing to help?"

"How?" Neville inquired cautiously.

Bellatrix hesitated and then responded. "I need you to write me a letter."

"Why? I'm right here." Neville said in an extremely confused voice.

"It needs to be a long letter." Bellatrix continued on. "I want you to tell me about growing up without your parents, the pain you felt, the sorrow, and anything else you have felt concerning them."

"I still don't understand why." Neville said quizzically. Harry too was looking rather mystified.

"I need to . . . understand." Bellatrix declared to them. "You'll see later."

Neville nodded reluctantly, willing to give it a try. "All right then. When do you need the letter?"

"Soon would be nice, but don't rush it. Put your heart into it." Bellatrix instructed. She stood up and nodded at Harry and Neville. "You two have other things to discuss right now and I need to go and do a little thinking about my idea so I'll leave you alone."

Harry stood up and hugged Bellatrix despite Neville's presence. "I'll see you later then."

Bellatrix smiled at him and hugged him back before leaving the room.

"We might as well go somewhere where we can sit down comfortably and discuss Potter's Legion." Harry declared as he and

Neville made their way to the door as the couch that had been conjured disappeared.

"That sounds fine." Neville stated as they exited. "I've talked to all the members of PL and most of them have committed to helping out with anything over the summer. I don't know if you've been told, but the Ministry has given permission for some students to use magic during the holiday. My Gran also reckons that she could obtain a special license from the Ministry to do a sort of 'summer school' where magic could be practiced. I'd be the one teaching of course, but that would still work."

Harry nodded encouragingly as they made their way down the various halls in the massive fortress. "Bypassing the restriction in that manner would be ingenious. Fudge would put up opposition to that though. Hopefully my other plans will come to a head before too long."

The two young wizards arrived at Harry's private study and made themselves comfortable. "I think that your group should come up with a new name." Harry said thoughtfully. "It will unavoidably become public and being linked to me in such a way could be detrimental."

"Lord Polairix's Legion?"

"No, still too closely connected to me."

"I'll have to see if any of them have ideas next time a large group of us assembles then." Neville decided.

"When will that be?"

Neville shrugged. "We haven't scheduled one for the summer yet."

In response, Harry stood up and began to slowly pace. "Try to get everyone together as soon as you can. Not only do you need to come up with a new name, you need to organize everybody and appoint some sort of hierarchy. The group is basically an army, so logic

dictates that you should have some ranks and those sorts of things assigned and organized.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Neville replied, already making plans as to how the now Potter’s Legion would be organized in the future.

“Getting everyone together could be somewhat difficult.” Harry said as he continued on with his monologue. “If your group needs money for Muggle transportation or needs assistance with magical transportation, I reckon that I can arrange for that somehow. Just keep me up to date on things. Can you do that?”

Neville responded affirmatively and then brought up another issue. “How much fighting can we expect to see?”

This brought Harry to a pause. “I don’t know.” he said at last. “It will be dangerous and therefore, lives could be lost. For that reason I can’t help but feel hesitant to put you in the worst situations.”

The door to Harry’s study opened and Count Hiscophney strolled in. “Perhaps I could help with that. If the volunteer students were to team up with my own teams, the students would be in less danger and my forces could be more spread out.”

A frown crossed Harry’s face as he studied the Count of Trazkaban. “How did you know what we were talking about?”

Hiscophney held up his hand that bore the ring used to communicate with Harry and Xerina. “I could hear you through this.”

“Oh.” Harry said, somewhat puzzled but satisfied enough with the answer that had been provided. He would have to examine his own ring further when he had the chance to do so.

The count made his way to an empty seat and sat down, preparing to take a part in the discussion that Harry and Neville had been having. Before the conversation could resume however, a flash came from one of the baskets on Harry’s desk signifying new mail.

Since the basket was in reach, Harry grabbed the parchment from his sitting place and opened the envelope after checking it for any possibly traps, curses, or jinxes and finding none. Inside the envelope was a small slip of parchment with a note hastily scribbled on it.

‘New developments- must see you immediately. Is the Leaky Cauldron in half an hour okay? Mockridge’

Harry reread the note before tearing an unwritten part off and writing ‘Fine’ on it followed by his initials. He then took a new envelope from his desk, slipped the parchment into it, sealed it, addressed it, and then dropped it in the out-basket from which it was promptly ‘flashed’ away.

“I’ve just received an urgent message and must go to meet an acquaintance.” Harry told Neville and Hiscophney. “Could you two make plans for the future of Potter’s Legion and how it will work in conjunction with my forces? I’ll be back as soon as I possibly can.”

The two were amiable to Harry’s proposal and by the time Harry exited his study, they were already deep into discussion concerning the issues at hand for the forces that would be fighting Voldemort in the coming months.

After finding Bellatrix and telling her about the letter, Harry retrieved a dark cloak trimmed with silver from his master suite, pulled up the hood, and then Apparated away to Diagon Alley rather than directly into the Leaky Cauldron. It would look better if it seemed that he had just come in for a drink or snack instead of going directly there to meet someone.

He entered the small pub from the back way into Diagon Alley and found the perfect atmosphere for a confidential meeting. The pub was busy enough that they would not attract unwanted attention for being the only customers at the hour, but slow enough that they would be able to keep away from others and still be able to hear each other.

Harry surveyed the room and saw that Tom the barkeep was at his customary post. He also saw that the patrons of the pub were

average people that he did not know in anyway and that Mockridge had not arrived yet.

Keeping his hood up, which was slightly unusual, Harry made his way to a vacant corner table from where he could watch both entrances to the pub and have a good view of the entire room. He then wandlessly cast a Notice-Me-Not charm over himself.

Five minutes later, Cuthbert Mockridge entered the pub from the Diagon Alley entrance and looked around casually. A small probe of his mind via Legillimency revealed that beneath his calm exterior, the Goblin Liaison official was flustered. The probe also revealed that he was not up to any underhand tricks.

Seeing that he was not about to be betrayed, Harry removed the protective charm and caught Mockridge's attention. Mockridge spotted Harry immediately. He made his way over to the corner table and sat down. "Have you ordered anything yet?" he asked.

"No." Harry responded. "Not yet."

Mockridge waved his hand to signal Tom. "One Firewhiskey and a . . ."

"Butterbeer." Harry finished, deepening his voice somewhat to disguise it.

"Firewhiskey and Butterbeer." Cuthbert reiterated.

Tom acknowledged the order from the bar and in a short moment the Ministry official had a tot of the strong drink and Harry had a bottle of Butterbeer. The Firewhiskey was promptly thrown down Mockridge's throat as if it was water.

"Why did you want to meet?" Harry inquired.

"All hell has broken loose in the Ministry." Mockridge informed Harry nervously. "We need to rearrange our plans and move forward

quickly if we're going to be able to get through this and end with me as Minister of Magic."

"What has happened?" Harry asked, suddenly worried that perhaps their scheme had been discovered though he knew the incredible odds that stood against such an event.

Mockridge stared longingly at his empty glass of Firewhiskey before answering. "You know Hermione Granger, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You also know that she was kidnapped and that you were accused of it, right?"

"Someone mentioned something about it."

"More like screamed it." Mockridge muttered, referring to the Ministry Chronicle. "Anyway, they found her locked in a coffin yesterday or the day before and since it was a criminal case, Madam Bones who heads up the Law Enforcement department was there. Granger told this story about how she had planned to see if she could run into you by going to various villages."

Harry looked at Mockridge with raised eyebrows, though Mockridge couldn't see them through the hood of the cloak. "I don't see how that would cause an uproar at the Ministry."

"It wasn't that specifically. It was how she managed to get to said villages. Then there's also the issue that if some sixth-year Hogwarts student can come up with a plan on how to predict which villages will be attacked, then why can't anyone else?" Mockridge explained.

"They actually realize that Fudge is incompetent after all this time?"

"Somewhat." Mockridge admitted dryly, still eyeing his empty glass. "The issue is that Minister Fudge gave Granger the Portkey that got her to the village where she was kidnapped from. Not only did said

Portkey take her to said village, it had the capability to be reused multiple times.”

Finally, Harry caught on and grinned. “I take it that giving Hermione the Portkey was slightly unethical and perhaps illegal.”

“Mostly. Madam Bones thinks that Fudge made a lot of noise about how you supposedly killed Granger. She has let it be known that she suspects Fudge of deliberately placing Granger in danger so that he could point the finger at you.”

Harry took a long swig from his Butterbeer bottle. “Well, that takes care of giving Fudge the bad reputation. Now we just need an agreement with the goblins as of last week. Is the Winzengamot going to do anything and is there any person that looks like they may be Minister soon?”

“I think that Dumbledore is going to convene the Wizengamot soon.” Mockridge said carefully. “Maybe tomorrow. Fudge’s authority is all but gone at this point. Not only are people at the Ministry angry about the Granger episode, they’re also complaining about the Gringotts problem.”

“Good,” Harry responded, “that means that an agreement with the goblins could still put you in a favorable light. Now, what about Dumbledore? I’m sure that he’s going to try and manipulate the outcome of any action taken. Is there someone that looks like they’re going for the job who might have his support?”

Mockridge thought for several moments. “Bones or Weasley. Amelia Bones is certainly high ranking enough and is the one actually making some of the accusations. Arthur Weasley is a very respected person around the Ministry despite his low rank. One of Fudges lackeys could go for it, and then there’s always the rare possibility of an outsider coming in. Dumbledore could have been Minister after the First War.”

“What about you? Do you have any respect or power?”

“I’m just sort of ‘there.’” Mockridge said. “The Gringotts thing could really throw me into the spotlight though.”

Harry finished off his Butterbeer with a big gulp, enjoying the sensation of the liquid going down his throat. “Gringotts has to happen now. How are you here? Have you left the Ministry for the day or are you on break?”

“I didn’t really say when I exited.” Mockridge admitted. “Things were too busy for anyone to really notice though.”

“Good.” Harry mumbled as his thoughts raced. He needed to throw the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office into the spotlight immediately which would mean dodging the hustle and bustle and getting attention. “Has the Ministry communicated with the goblins since the closure? Petitions for re-opening perhaps?”

“Not lately.”

“Blast.”

“I could back-date some sort of routine letter maybe.” Mockridge said nervously, trying to please Harry.

“No. Absolutely not.” Harry declared as he tried to think up a new idea. “If you were to go to a meeting with the goblins, are there papers in your office that you would bring along with you?”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Harry said as he pulled out his Black ash wand and used it to conjure a piece of parchment and some necessary writing utensils. “Write a formal letter to Gringotts asking for an audience with Lord Gold to discuss options for perhaps opening the bank again.”

Wasting not time, Mockridge grabbed the quill that Harry had conjured and began to write a neat and official letter to Gringotts. As the quill made scratching noises on the parchment, Harry scanned the room, observing the various patrons. None of them seemed to be

particularly interested in what the two men in the corner were doing. That was definitely good.

"Done!" Mockridge declared as he signed his name with a minor flourish.

Harry waved his wand which was still in his hand and had the parchment sealed. The Ministry of Magic seal was even perfectly imitated. "Good. I'll personally take this to Lord Gold. I'm sure that he'll cooperate and willingly meet with you immediately. I want you to go back to the Ministry and wait for Lord Gold to send you a response. If possible, make sure that other people are around to see you receive that letter. Be sure to let them know what it is and make a big show of getting whatever papers you'll need. Got that?"

"Yes." Mockridge answered, with a faintly excited gleam in his eyes. "Go back to the office and wait for the letter. Make sure everyone knows that I'm going to the bank to negotiate with the goblins."

"Right. I'll meet you at Gringotts."

A painful groan escaped from Hermione's lips as she woke up and tasted something gritty in her mouth. When she opened her eyes, she found herself face down in some sand. Apparently the tide had washed her up on some beach recently. She deduced the 'recently' part from that fact that she was still sopping wet.

She rolled over and sat up with a grimace. The water had not been gentle at all. Every part of her ached and her clothes were an absolute mess. After a few moments, Hermione managed to gather enough strength to sit up and look around. Hopefully, she had been washed across the channel that separated Azkaban from the mainland.

As Hermione look around, she deduced that this was not the case. She was standing on a sandy island connected to a more rocky island by a . . . black bridge. Her eyes widened as she followed the bridge and spotted a large and imposing black castle that was just as, if not bigger than Hogwarts.

Before she could do any more, several pops surrounded and she found herself surrounded by several men in silver robes, each with their wands trained on her. Deciding that irritating them would be a bad idea, Hermione weakly raised her hands in the air.

One of them stepped forward. "You're under arrest for trespassing." he declared.

Hermione decided to be brave. "I didn't intentionally trespass, I was washed up on your beach and what gives you the authority to arrest me? You don't look like you're from the Ministry and I'm a British subject."

"If you're the person who disturbed the wards, then you're a trespasser." the man declared stiffly. He smiled triumphantly when he saw a flicker of guilt in Hermione's eyes. "I am Captain Nailoff of the Earl of the North's bodyguard. You're in Lord Polairix's domain, therefore, you are subject to him no matter who you are."

This declaration caused Hermione some excitement, nervousness, and fear. Apparently she had found where Harry lived but was now under arrest. If he was mad at her, which he probably was, then she was most certainly at his mercy. "Conceded." she sighed.

"Follow me." Nailoff instructed. He began to walk towards the black bridge and with the other guards' wands trained on her, Hermione followed.

As they approached the black fortress, Hermione couldn't help but ask questions. "What's the name of this castle?"

Nailoff didn't seem to be in a good mood for answering questions, but he humored her nevertheless. "This is the Fortress of Nair'icaix, the Seat of House Polairix which has held the Earldom of the North for millennia."

Hermione was silenced as they approached the castle. It was extremely intimidating and if it was any reflection of Harry's power,

then she and the Order were in deep trouble. She suspected that it was only Harry's mercy that had spared them from destruction.

They entered through a pair of large doors and into a most impressive entrance hall. Hermione would have liked to stand around and look at everything, but the silver-clad guards had other ideas. They led her into what appeared to be a study, probably Harry's and had her stand before a very imposing desk. "Wait here." Nailoff instructed her with a nod to the other guards signaling that they should see to it that she followed his directions.

It seemed an eternity before Nailoff returned to the study. "Lord Polairix is currently unavailable." the captain announced. "Count Trazkaban is here and will see to you."

A moment later, a very familiar man entered the room and Hermione instantly felt a wave of nausea. It was the man who had beheaded Lucius Malfoy right in front of her. When his eyes fell on her, Hermione spotted a spark of recognition in the emotionless eyes.

Count Trazkaban approached her and went around the desk. Instead of sitting in the chair behind the desk, he sat in a chair that had automatically appeared to the side of it. "I recognize you." he said, wasting no time. "You're a member of that pesky Order and one of the ones who declared to the whole world that Harry Potter was an absolute creep."

"I don't deny that." Hermione said bravely. "I came here to see Harry and I refuse to leave until I at least have a chance to speak to him."

"If I wanted to have you thrown off the island, I doubt that you could stop me." the count declared stiffly. "In any case, you will be staying. For all I know, you were sent to spy by the Order. The Order has already done enough damage and I will allow no more damage when preventing it is within my ability and reach."

"Does that mean I'm in trouble?" Hermione inquired faintly.

“That depends on how Lord Polairix feels.” Trazkaban declared. “Until he decides though, you’ll have the pleasure of testing out the dungeons for us.”

Hermione winced but responded somewhat wittily. “Glad to help. Just so long as Harry knows that I’m here and that I wish to speak with him.”

The count shrugged. “I was just leaving when Nailoff stopped me and will probably not see Lord Polairix for a while. However, I’ll have the guards inform Lady Bellatrix of your presence. She might even tell Lord Polairix.”

“Thanks a lot.” Hermione retorted.

The count ignored her and addressed Captain Nailoff. “Lock her up in the dungeon and tell Lady Polairix that a trespasser has been apprehended. Get her name and any information pertaining to her and record it as well.”

Captain Nailoff nodded respectfully. “I shall.”

And that was how Hermione found herself in an ancient dungeon. Filch would have been proud.

Chapter Thirty-One

Without any delay, Harry made his way to Gringotts bearing Mockridge's letter and was promptly admitted into the bank and led to Lord Gold's office by one of the goblin guards. He was not quizzed as to his motives for the visit, which showed to Harry that his alliance with the goblins was indeed intact and functioning smoothly.

Lord Gold promptly received him, setting aside any work he had been doing. "It is good to see you, Lord Polairix. What brings you to Gringotts today? Something we can help you with perhaps?"

Harry chose his words carefully. "I was hoping that you would help me with a bit of a scheme. If it goes well, a more trustworthy and competent Minister of Magic will come to power. In order for such a person to accomplish that, they must have something that will give them a bit of a claim to fame."

"Yes," Gold said, catching on almost immediately, "a wizard or witch who got the credit for negotiating a reopening of the bank would be looked upon most favorably by the Ministry and magical populace."

"Said wizard or witch would also be in your debt and feel obligated to show great favor toward the goblin population." Harry pointed out. "Not only that, you could drive a somewhat hard bargain to even reopen in the first place. They would have no choice but to accept."

Gold nodded and Harry could already tell that he was pleased with the prospects of the situation that Harry had arranged. "I assume that you already have a candidate for the office of Minister of Magic, especially now that the Ministry is in a tumult."

"Cuthbert Mockridge." Harry stated.

"A wise choice. Mockridge has always been polite to us and he is in no way responsible for the current situation." Gold commented. "Wizards and witches all over Britain would start crying 'foul' if it was just some random Ministry official. They'd suspect Voldemort rather

than you, though." The goblin's voice then took on a sarcastic tinge. "After all, Goblins aren't human, therefore they must be evil."

Without wasting any time, Harry produced the letter that he had instructed Mockridge to write back in the Leaky Cauldron. "I have a letter from him asking for an audience so that he can discuss options to reopen the bank."

Lord Gold took the letter from Harry and quickly skimmed it. "Very well, then. I assume that you want this meeting to take place immediately."

"That would be very convenient." Harry said.

"That means that I need to respond as we speak then." Gold said as he gathered some writing utensils and began drafting a response. "I also assume that you want to ensure that the whole Ministry knows that Mockridge will be having this meeting with me."

"Yes," Harry nodded, "this agreement will come too quickly and randomly as it is."

Gold grinned. "I can make sure that everyone knows . . ."

Cuthbert Mockridge made his way back to the Ministry and entered via the Atrium. Without wasting a moment, he made his way to where the hub of the action concerning Fudge was- the level that housed the Law Enforcement department. He needed to know what the latest news was.

He arrived on the appropriate floor in record time and saw numerous witches and wizards milling about, having heated discussions or trying to do their work amongst the confusion. The largest group was congregated near Madame Bones's office and was being held at bay by her secretary.

Mockridge opted to avoid the vulture reputation and when he spotted Kingsley Shacklebolt, he quickly strode over and struck up a conversation. "What's the latest?"

"Amelia is expected to file a formal indictment accusing Minister Fudge of several crimes associated with the Granger girl." Shacklebolt replied, giving most of his attention to Mockridge. "The Aurors have already formally filed a motion of 'no confidence' with regard to Fudge's ability to fight Voldemort and Potter."

"Fudge's term is about to come to an abrupt end, then." Mockridge said, stating the obvious. "The question now concerns who his successor will be. How is Fudge taking it?"

Shacklebolt chuckled. "Not very well at all. His assistant, Percy Weasley, was down here a half-hour ago protesting everything in general and trying to restore order. He finally gave up."

"Sounds humiliating."

"He needed it," commented another voice. The speaker came closer and Mockridge identified her as an Auror named Tonks. She then addressed the two men. "So, who do you suppose will be the next Minister of Magic?"

Both men shrugged casually and Mockridge realized that Shacklebolt had his own agenda as to who should succeed Fudge just as he did. This meant he was either for Dumbledore or Voldemort or had plans for himself. He would have to tread carefully. "Someone competent, I hope."

"Bones would be an obvious choice." Shacklebolt said carefully to Mockridge and Tonks. "There's others with good reputations though. If Arthur Weasley were to leave the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office, I could easily see him as Minister."

At that moment, Mockridge was sure beyond a doubt that Shacklebolt was with Dumbledore somehow. "They sound all right." he said in a noncommittal voice.

"Perhaps." Tonks said, the expression on her face seemingly agreeing with Shacklebolt's choices. Mockridge wasn't sure, but he

thought he could sense a slight undercurrent in Tonks manner. Did she secretly support another faction?

His thoughts were interrupted when one of their potential nominees walked up to the group and joined them. "Already deciding on who the new Minister should be, I take it." Arthur Weasley commented cheerfully. He was carrying several files and looked to be on an errand.

"We were thinking that you could do it." Shacklebolt replied.

This made Weasley look uncomfortable. "I suppose I would do it if called on. Things are just too difficult and I don't think I have enough experience to be competent. Not only will the new Minister be besieged by Voldemort and Potter, but the public will demand action taken to reconcile the goblins at Gringotts." Weasley looked at Mockridge. "Has Fudge asked you to do anything about Gringotts and is there any progress that you know of?"

Arthur Weasley had just given Mockridge the perfect opening. "I have not been asked to do anything concerning the matter, but earlier on today, I sent a missive to Lord Gold requesting a possible meeting to discuss solutions to our problem."

"That's good." Tonks said brightly. "I sure hope the goblins like you better than they like Fudge."

"It's hard to tell with goblins." Mockridge said, drawing upon his experience with dealing with the magical race that ran Gringotts.

The timing could not have been more perfect. The lift made a noise to indicate that it was making a stop at their level and then opened to reveal a very flustered employee from the Goblin Liaison Office who was being trailed by a goblin messenger.

This immediately caught everyone's attention and even the people stationed at the entrance of Madame Bones's office turned to look at the action. After all, how often did a goblin walk into the Ministry of Magic, especially considering the current situation?

“Mr. Mockridge,” said the exasperated official, “this goblin has just arrived from Gringotts with a letter from the head of the bank. He insists on personally delivering it to you since you’re the Head of the Goblin Liaison office.”

The goblin formally strode forward and with a bow, handed a sealed letter to Mockridge. “Lord Gold expects a prompt response.” he said, his goblin accent very thick and loud.

“I shall respond immediately of course.” Mockridge said, feeling slightly flustered himself. Potter had obviously managed to pull his part of the job off, now the ball was in his court.

The goblin stood there looking at Mockridge. Apparently he had been instructed to wait for the response. Further pressure was put on Mockridge by Tonks. “Open it! This could be the solution to our Gringotts problem!”

With a quick snap, the seal on the letter was broken and Mockridge wasted no time unfolding the letter to examine it. He quickly skimmed the short message which invited Mockridge to come to Gringotts with the returning messenger for a meeting to discuss options on reopening the bank.

“What does it say?” Shacklebolt inquired. Everyone in the room listened for Mockridge’s response while pretending not to.

Realizing that he was now on stage and that every action he took could have an effect on the outcome of the plan, Mockridge planned his words and actions very carefully. Not everyone knew that he had sent a letter to the goblins first. They would need to know that. “It’s a response to the letter I sent to the goblins earlier. Lord Gold has agreed to meet with me to discuss the possibility of reopening the bank.”

“ Why are they being so agreeable?” Mr. Weasley asked suspiciously.

Already, opposition had reared its head. Fortunately, this comment could be turned to be favorable with an appropriate response. "I think they are being agreeable because they know about Fudge's imminent downfall. It was he who caused them to close the bank in the first place and they can't enjoy being closed anymore than we do."

Mr. Weasley was about to say another thing but Tonks cut him off, seemingly in ignorance. "There's no use in keeping Lord Gold or his messenger waiting, Mockridge."

"Right you are." Cuthbert said with a smile. "I'll run up to my office and gather some necessary papers and then get moving."

He then left the floor with the goblin escort in tow and quickly headed to his office, meeting very few people on the way. Gathering all of his papers took only a few moments and within minutes, he found himself entering Gringotts bank and being escorted to the offices.

Hermione felt an immense amount of relief once the Count of Trazkaban left the room. Not only did she find his brand of magic to be creepy, but she was well aware of the fact that he viewed her as the enemy. She had seen firsthand what happened to his enemies. Cutting her head off may or may not be appropriate punishment considering the trouble that her actions had caused, but she would prefer to speak to Harry first.

Further thoughts were laid aside when Captain Nailoff moved. Hermione could sense that his attitude toward her had changed for the worst somewhat since Trazkaban had identified her as a member of the Order of the Phoenix and a key ruiner of Harry's reputation. Trespassing was one thing, being a member of the Order was another.

A heavy pair of metal shackles appeared from nowhere onto the massive desk and Nailoff picked them up promptly as if he had been expecting their appearance. He roughly locked them onto Hermione's wrists.

“Follow me.” Nailoff commanded curtly, motioning toward the door and nodding to the other guards that they should fall into line with their wands drawn.

They made their way out of the room, across the hall, through some more doors, and then down a dark and steep staircase. Hermione, realizing that the heavy shackles would prevent her from steadyng herself should she stumble, was very careful in choosing her footing as they descended.

Several staircases later, they arrived at the dungeon level where Nailoff had opted to take her. Hermione followed him into a room and when it was lighted, surveyed its contents and shuddered. It was a torture chamber right out of the Middle Ages. It reminded her of the ones in castles that she had toured with her family. The only difference was that the tools were very shiny, sharp, and ready for use.

“We will process you here.” Nailoff said with a hint of an evil grin. He gestured to a very sinister looking chair that was equipped with straps to hold the head, arms, and legs in place. “Sit there.”

As Hermione sat down and shuddered, Nailoff caused a simple desk and a chair to appear next to the chair. He sat down as the other guards took various places in the room. A moment or so passed as Hermione looked around the room and let her imagination ruin her day.

It ended when a guard who had apparently been sent off by Nailoff arrived with a book and presented it to Nailoff. The captain whispered some commands to the guard who then left again and then opened the book to reveal blank pages. A quill and ink appeared on the table and he began to write slowly in the book. “Name?”

“Hermione Jane Granger.”

“Age?”

“Sixteen.”

This went on for several minutes and eventually Captain Nailoff stopped asking her questions and started writing down what Hermione assumed were details concerning her arrest, interview, and anything else the guards would find relevant at a later point in time.

Hermione had just been able to relax somewhat in the torture chair when the guard that Nailoff had sent off returned carrying a piece of parchment that Hermione assumed was magical in some way. Nailoff finished writing in the book, closed it, and exchanged it for the piece of parchment. He quickly wrote Hermione's name on it and then stood up. "This is everyone's favorite part." Nailoff said.

He strode over to a wall and after some careful deliberation, plucked a wicked looking knife from the wall. Seeing this, Hermione gasped as cold shivers caused her body to spasm. They were going to torture her.

Sensing that she might bolt, two of the guards stepped forward and held her in the chair by her shoulders, apparently deciding that the straps were unnecessary. Nailoff walked up to her holding the parchment and knife. "Don't get too excited." he whispered. He then pushed what was left of one of Hermione's tattered sleeves away and poked her with the knife.

Some blood promptly seeped from the wound and Nailoff pressed the parchment with her name on it to the wound, watching as the blood seeped into the parchment. The blood caused the parchment to turn cold and blue. When Nailoff removed it, Hermione saw that the wound had healed. This caused her to let out a sigh of relief.

"I told you not to get too excited." Nailoff said, motioning for the guards to remove their hands and return to their positions. "Now, for the tour of your new home away from home."

At his gesture, Hermione stood up from the frightening chair and followed the captain out of the chamber and a ways down the hall with the other guards on their trail. They made their way around a corner and Hermione could see that the walls of this corridor were lined with iron barred doors to small cells.

“This one will do.” Nailoff stated, reaching out and opening one of the barred doors. It opened, sensing his authority to open it.

Hermione meekly walked into the cell and Nailoff followed her in. Being very unsure of things, always eager for knowledge, and her general fear caused Hermione to start asking questions. “How long will I be here?”

“I don’t know.”

“What about restroom facilities?”

Nailoff looked around the cell curiously. Apparently he wasn’t very experienced with their use. That meant that Harry didn’t often take prisoners. Hermione didn’t know whether that was good or bad. “I reckon that they’ll appear when you need them.” Nailoff responded.

“How?”

“None of your business.” Nailoff retorted, hoping that this would stem the flow of questions.

However, his hopes were not to come true. Hermione continued to ask questions, though her manner became more meek by the second. “Will you feed me?”

“You’ll be fed.”

“How soon until Harry finds out I’m here?”

“I don’t know.”

Hermione seemed to be done with the questions, but one last one occurred to her as she looked at herself. “What about clothes? Do you issue uniforms?” She motioned to her own clothes which were now only tattered rags. “Mine are done for and will be uncomfortable.”

One of the other guards spoke up. "The point of a dungeon isn't exactly comfort, lady."

Nailoff rolled his eyes and then deciding that the girl had a point about her current clothes, reached out and with a few yanks and rips, removed all but Hermione's undergarments which seemed to be in fairly good condition. This caused her to shriek and hug herself in an attempt to protect her modesty. "We'll let Lady Bellatrix decide about clothes." Nailoff announced. "Meanwhile, we'll make sure that it doesn't get overly cold in here and that your 'possessions' are taken care of."

"Is that it?" Hermione asked, very meekly.

"I suppose."

With that, the guards all left, shutting the cell door behind them. Shivering from the cold, Hermione sunk in a corner and hugged her knees. The guards weren't being very friendly, but what could she expect? It was these thoughts and others about obtaining Harry's forgiveness that kept Hermione occupied for the next while.

Several hours later, Bellatrix examined a book on the ancient healing arts for the third time in a row. There was nothing there that said that her crazy idea on how to heal the Longbottoms would not work. Then again, there was nothing there that said it would work. Making the magic element of the cure work would be the key. Fortunately, Harry would be able to help her in that area greatly.

Bellatrix was just putting her texts away in their proper places when Captain Nailoff entered the library and gave a deep nod of respect to her.

"Can I help you, captain?" Bellatrix asked, not sure whether she should be worried about the captain of Harry's bodyguard coming to speak with her.

"We captured a trespasser earlier this evening, milady. Count Trazkaban ordered her to be locked up in the dungeons to await your

pleasure as Lord Polairix is currently unavailable." Nailoff said neutrally.

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows. Someone had worked hard to find the island and then to trespass on it. "Who is this trespasser?"

"Hermione Granger." Nailoff answered. "The count identified her as a member of the Order and a potential spy. She claims that she has come to talk to Lord Polairix."

The first emotional response to the announcement of Hermione's presence was anger. That little girl had created trouble and emotional pain for Harry. Then there was of course the little incident back at the small town that Voldemort had framed Harry for attacking. Bellatrix blushed when she realized that the 'little girl' was her husband's age. Finally she gained control of her emotions. "Have you locked her up in the dungeon?"

"Yes, milady." Nailoff answered respectfully before going into an account about processing the prisoner. Bellatrix was very amused by the part that took place in the torture chamber.

The next debate that took place in Bellatrix's mind was what to do with the Granger girl. Should she just leave her for Harry to deal with, should she go and beat the snot out of her and then let Harry deal with her, or should she do something else?

Bellatrix decided on something else. Though it was tempting, the impulse to abuse the teenager was no good. However, there were some things she wanted to talk to the girl about and then what Harry did with her was irrelevant as far as she was concerned.

"Take me to where you've locked her up." she commanded Nailoff.

"As you wish, milady." Nailoff said.

Together, Nailoff and Bellatrix made their way down to the dungeons. Bellatrix noted with some amusement that Hermione had been placed in one of the deepest levels that the dungeon had to offer. This

pleased her as it demonstrated that the guards felt a sense of loyalty to Harry.

Eventually, Nailoff led her to a cell where she spotted the half-naked girl huddled in a corner of the cell. Hermione had spotted them and was looking at her specifically with some hope in her eyes as well as a great amount of trepidation.

Bellatrix was about to enter the cell when Nailoff held his hand in front of her. "Pardon me, milady. If you mean to interview her in the cell, I must make sure she is restrained. This could be a ploy to assassinate you or Lord Polairix."

Shoving aside self-declarations that she could handle a prisoner, Bellatrix nodded which signaled Nailoff to see to having Miss Granger restrained. If something were to happen, Harry would never forgive himself and not only that, there was no reason to worry Harry about what could have happened. There was also the baby.

Nailoff entered and Hermione rose stiffly from her crouching position. She was still wearing the heavy shackles from earlier so Nailoff made use of them and used them to raise her arms above her head and attached them to a hook that appeared from nowhere as things often did in Nair'icaix. Nailoff then exited the cell with a bow for Bellatrix and then stationed himself a short distance down the hall.

Bellatrix then entered the cell and made eye contact with Hermione. One of the interrogation tips learned long ago came to mind. 'They'll talk on their own and reveal what is important.' Bellatrix took this to heart and while waiting for Hermione to start talking conjured a comfortable arm-chair and sat down.

What Granger said first would be key in figuring out what was the most important to her. She would save the Legillimency for Harry in this case. Bellatrix sat back and then coolly looked Hermione in the eyes. Hermione was clearly nervous, but made a valiant effort to return the gaze.

Finally, she began to talk on her own as Bellatrix had predicted. "I've realized that Harry is innocent and I've come to apologize and do whatever it takes to win back his friendship."

Taking Hermione's declaration of Harry's innocence at face value, Bellatrix zeroed in on the last two parts of the statement. "How do you apologize for a betrayal that caused someone immense pain and indirectly helped Voldemort in his quest to kill and torture?"

This caused tears to run down Hermione's face. "I know that being sorry isn't enough, but what more can I do?"

"Nothing." Bellatrix answered bluntly. "That's why it's hard to apologize. It's bad enough that you gave Voldemort the advantage, but do you realize that Harry will still think himself responsible for those he couldn't save?" This caused Hermione to hang her head in shame as she realized how true Bellatrix's words were.

"How fortunate for you that Harry is a non-confrontational person." Bellatrix continued on. "Knowing him, as soon as he returns from his business, he will promptly tell you that it's okay and send you on your sorry way just to get you out of his way. After that, he'll avoid you and pretend that nothing ever happened. You'll be expected to avoid him as well of course."

This statement caused Hermione to let out a pathetic sob. "He'll still feel hurt and angry even if he hides it. I want to win back his friendship so that we can go back to the way we were. It's the only way that I'll be able to feel that he's completely forgiven me. Otherwise, I'll always wonder what his true feelings are toward me and my betrayal."

"You are striving for the impossible, I think." Bellatrix stated, taking a small bit of pleasure from the distress that this obviously caused the girl. She couldn't help but to do so; it was natural. This made Bellatrix slightly unhappy.

She didn't want to give into natural instincts. They led to the Dark side of magic. Those who strived for a higher standard were the witches

and wizards of the Light. They were the ones with the strength to prevail and not let the instinctive reactions of anger and lust for revenge drag them down into the pit of evil. It was Voldemort's anger with Muggles and his father that had driven him to become a Dark wizard.

Several moments passed and Bellatrix reviewed these thoughts silently in her mind as she watched Harry's treacherous friend began to sob uncontrollably, unable to wipe the tears from her eyes or face due to the fact that her arms were suspended above her by chains.

It was then that Light dawned upon Bellatrix's mind. What this young witch had done did not matter any more. Bellatrix herself had committed worse crimes than this young woman was responsible for. Harry was the antithesis of her former actions.

If he could completely forgive the girl and welcome her back into a full friendship, then that would prove that he was indeed a strong wizard. Furthermore, his ability to forgive Granger would forevermore lay to rest any doubts that Bellatrix may ever have of his pure love for her and forgiveness for her past actions.

Suddenly, Bellatrix wanted to see Harry completely forgive and welcome back Hermione Granger with every fiber of her being for Harry's own sake. If he couldn't forgive and forget, then it was possible that he would ruin his life.

He would need help to do so though and Bellatrix was more than willing to provide it. He would have to do it by himself though, and not feel pressured. Hermione would have to remain in the cell free from any interference on Bellatrix's part.

Bellatrix then stood up and strode to Hermione so unexpectedly that Hermione started and then quailed in fear. The two had fought viciously in a cat-fight previously and now Bellatrix had a complete advantage.

However, instead of harming Hermione, Bellatrix awkwardly hugged her like she would hug her sister, Narcissa. "I'll do everything I can to help you win back your friendship." she whispered to the young

woman who was now shedding silent tears. “Don’t give up no matter what may happen.”

Then, without another word, Bellatrix turned around and strode from the cell causing the armchair to disappear. Within seconds she met Captain Nailoff in the hall. “I’m finished interviewing the prisoner, captain.” She then conjured a rough blanket of sorts and handed it to him. “Return her to how she was before I came and give her this. You are not to inform Lord Polairix of the prisoner’s presence until I let you- it’s for the best. Is that clear?”

“Yes, milady.” Nailoff responded in a confused voice. Captain Nailoff watched as Lady Bellatrix strode away as he held the blanket that she had handed him. Shrugging, he turned and went to the cell where he found the prisoner who had apparently been crying. She now had a look of confused wonder in her eyes.

She was so confused that she hardly responded when Nailoff caused the hook holding her shackled arms above her head to disappear, leaving her to sink to the floor stiffly. No sure what else to do, Nailoff haphazardly draped the blanket over her shivering body before exiting and securing the cell. He missed the look of complete and utter determination that appeared in Hermione’s eyes, lighted by the hope that Lady Bellatrix had given her.

Chapter Thirty-Two

To Cuthbert Mockridge, it only seemed like a matter of minutes between the time he arrived at the bank and the time that an agreement was decided upon with the chief goblin. As he mentally reviewed the negotiations, he realized that they were actually very simple. Then of course, the reason that the bank had closed in the first place was rather small and simple as well.

“On what date do you intend to reopen your doors?” Mockridge asked Lord Gold diplomatically as Harry watched on.

“Did you have a particular day in mind?” Gold replied idly as he reviewed a written copy of their negotiations and decisions.

Harry who had opted to remain apart from the negotiations decided to step in. “Might I suggest that you wait to reopen the bank until the Ministry settles down under the control of a new Minister of Magic?”

“That is an excellent suggestion, Lord Polairix.” the goblin said, looking at Mockridge to see if he agreed with Harry's idea.

“It would be for the best, I think.” Mockridge concurred.

Lord Gold smiled evilly has he returned the copy of the agreement to the table and began to add one last thing to it. “Someone has to decide when the Ministry is stable enough for the bank to reopen. I reckon that you're intelligent enough to make that decision, Mockridge. I'm putting down that the bank will reopen when you, Cuthbert Mockridge, formally sign a declaration that the Ministry is structurally stable.”

A laugh of mirth burst from Harry's lips. “I could not have planned that any better myself, Lord Gold. Your little provision could quite possibly make Cuthbert's ascension to the top job ten times more likely.”

“Let us hope so.” Mockridge muttered. “We need to formally sign the agreement and have copies made.” He looked at Harry. “Would you sign as a witness?”

"I'm not sure if the wizarding populace would appreciate what my signature would signify concerning my relations with you and Gringotts." Harry stated. "Their reaction could cause everything to backfire."

Mockridge grinned at Harry. "No one besides us will see the signed agreement. If I become Minister, I can't automatically declare or recognize you as innocent, but after the dust settles with this war, and or if there is an opportunity, your signature on this agreement will go a ways toward bringing you into favor."

"He is correct." Lord Gold stated, addressing Harry. "I'd even go as far as to have you sign as more than a witness- perhaps as the 'mediator' or 'judge.'"

"All right then." Harry acquiesced.

Lord Gold nodded and with a complicated gesture and bit of magic, summoned another goblin who was bearing a special ink and quill set into the office. The other goblin left and Lord Gold set up the quill and ink for use. "These are what we use to sign formal and binding treaties." he explained.

"I'm not sure if I can legally sign the agreement then. I don't really have the authority to sign treaties on behalf of the Ministry of Magic." Mockridge pointed out cautiously. "Our agreement would not be binding."

"I've already taken that into account." Lord Gold said, reassuring Mockridge. "Based on wizarding laws, both ancient and contemporary, you may sign the treaty so long as it is formally ratified by the Minister of Magic within a year of the signing or before its implementation."

"If you become Minister, that won't be a problem at all." Harry concluded as Lord Gold nodded. "If this falls through, whoever does become Minister would be crazy not to ratify."

With a nod, Mockridge took the quill which Lord Gold had offered him and scrawled his signature at the bottom of the document. The quill was returned to the goblin who made his mark and then to Harry who signed his name; Harry James Potter. As soon as the ink dried on Harry's name, more writing appeared beneath it. "Lord of Polairix, Earl of the North."

"That's all." Lord Gold declared, taking the parchment and setting it aside. "I'll have copies made and delivered to you two. I suggest that you return to the Ministry with your good news. On your way out, you may pick up a formal press statement that I took the liberty to have written up during our conference."

"We'll do that." Mockridge stated, standing up and shaking Lord Gold's hand.

When Professor Albus Dumbledore made his entrance in the Ministry Atrium, the immense crowd that had gathered in the big room immediately turned their attention to him and began shouting questions concerning the present situation. Apparently the Ministry officials had been attempting to keep them uninformed of the current situation.

Dumbledore chose to ignore the inquisitive crowd until he arrived at the security desk and had his wand appropriately checked in. He then turned and cast the Sonorus charm. "Quiet!" When the noise had died down he continued on in an informative voice. "Yes, it is true that Madame Bones has formally filed charges against Minister Fudge. He will either step down or be removed. His successor will be chosen by the common consent of present Ministry officials. Madame Bones and Arthur Weasley are currently being looked at as potential candidates."

"What about Cuthbert Mockridge?" shouted someone from the crowd.

This caused Dumbledore to frown with confusion. He had carefully advanced the possibility for Bones and Weasley to become Minister of Magic. It was a winner-take-all situation and in such, there were usually only two serious candidates. He supported both, so he and

the Order could not lose. He had not planned on another possible candidate. "All worthy candidates will be considered." he said, not willing to admit that he did not know about situation that had brought Mockridge to public attention.

He then turned and made his way into the heart of the Ministry controversy which had moved from the Law Enforcement floor to the formal ballroom in which ceremonies were held due to the large amount of people wishing to be in on the action.

Arthur Weasley met him before he could arrive in the ballroom. "Fudge is basically done for. They haven't removed him yet, but he's being ignored and he and his staff are avoiding everyone else."

"What is this that I hear about Cuthbert Mockridge?" Dumbledore asked.

"Ah yes, him." Weasley said slowly. "A couple of hours ago, he received a hand delivered message from Gringotts. Apparently he made some overtures to the goblins and they answered him. A lot of people are talking about making him Minister if his meeting with them turns out for good. As we speak, he is at Gringotts discussing options to open the bank."

This news provided to be very disturbing to Dumbledore. As far as he knew, Mockridge was a good and competent man. There was nothing to indicate that he was a Death Eater either. The only problem with him in Dumbledore's book was that he had no ties to the Order. "How is it that he's risen in popularity so fast?" Dumbledore inquired. "He was practically unknown before today."

"The closing of Gringotts is the most blatant of Fudge's misdeeds from the point of view shared by the majority of people." Weasley explained. "It's also the one affecting everyone the most. The instant that it was leaked outside the Ministry that Mockridge was in negotiations, the news spread like wildfire. Mockridge's name is on everyone's lips."

The two wizards arrived in the ballroom to find the entire Ministry present and all discussing issues in small groups. A podium had been set up and various officials were making fiery speeches to those who cared to listen.

Seeing that everyone was present, Dumbledore came to a split-second decision. He announced it quietly to Mr. Weasley and then to Amelia Bones who had joined them as soon as she had spied them entering the room. "We need to have the new Minister put in immediately if it is to be one of you." Dumbledore said. "Mockridge could return at any moment."

"Let's do it then." Bones replied. "As the leader of the Wizengamot, I believe that you have the authority to take charge here, Professor."

Dumbledore nodded in agreement and without wasting any more time, made his way to the raised podium and took it from the witch who had just finished spouting off accusations about inadequacies in some sort of budget.

Making use of the Sonorus charm for a second time, Dumbledore spoke. "SILENCE!" Immediately, the ballroom quieted and turned their attention to the aged professor. "Cornelius Fudge has been formally accused by the appropriate authorities of several misdeeds. Speaking for the Wizengamot, I hereby declare this to be the equivalent of the first step to a vote of no confidence.

"Based on the No Confidence Act of 1650, the body convened here at this moment has the authority to hold a what is known as a 'Certiorari' vote and appoint a new Minister of Magic which would both complete the vote of no confidence and formally oust Fudge. Those present can also vote to have Fudge remain in office. So, all those in favor of holding a Certiorari vote say 'Aye.'"

The audience replied with a thunderous 'Aye.' The first step had been taken, now all Dumbledore needed was to get a majority behind either Weasley or Bones.

Before Dumbledore could continue his address, the doors to the ballroom burst open and Cuthbert Mockridge entered the room with all those who had been gathered in Atrium on his heels. With what Dumbledore recognized as forced confidence, Mockridge made his way to the podium and then respectfully spoke loudly to Dumbledore. Almost everyone could hear him.

"I've just returned from Gringotts, Professor. The witches and wizards who were waiting in the Atrium are eager to hear the results of my negotiations. However, the officials of the Ministry are entitled to hear them first as I informed those in the Atrium. They decided that they couldn't wait until I finished making the internal announcement."

It was then that Dumbledore could sense that neither Weasley nor Bones had a very good chance at becoming the Minister of Magic. The two were similar and would be considered the same when put in contrast with Mockridge. His plan for supporting both candidates had backfired drastically. He made one last-ditch attempt to save the outcome. "We are currently holding a Certiorari vote, Mr. Mockridge. Perhaps afterward we could hear your announcement."

Cuthbert Mockridge did not reply, mostly because he did not have to. As soon as the audience had heard Dumbledore's refusal to let him speak, they immediately all began to demand in loud voices that Mockridge be allowed to speak immediately.

Dumbledore had been able to harness the out-of-control crowd to his favor for a few minutes, but now it had slipped out of his control. There was nothing he could do about it. "The vote can wait then." Dumbledore graciously announced.

He would rather have Mockridge than Fudge as Minister. He had lost control of the vote's outcome, but he still wanted to ensure that the vote took place. "Witches and Wizards, I present to you the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office. Cuthbert Mockridge." Dumbledore announced.

Mockridge replaced Dumbledore at the podium and began to speak. "I have just concluded negotiations with Lord Gold who is the head goblin over at Gringotts." He then held up the piece of parchment that

had been provided to him and Potter on their way out of the bank. "I hold here a copy of a public announcement that is to be sent out by Gringotts tomorrow. It states that as soon as I am able to declare the Ministry to be in a stable state, Gringotts will open its doors!"

With despair on the behalf of his well set plans and the Order, Dumbledore watched and listened as Mockridge's announcement was met with cheers and shouts from the financially burdened witches and wizards present. Abruptly, two chants broke out and took a firm hold. The verbal renditions of "VOTE NOW!" and "MOCK-RIDGE!" nearly brought the ceiling down.

Before anything else could be done, the doors to the ballroom abruptly burst open with a loud slam. Dumbledore watched with confusion as William Boggs, one of Fudge's under secretaries, led approximately one hundred and fifty Aurors into the room with their wands drawn. For some strange reason, Boggs, who was a bureaucrat, was also wearing Auror robes.

"None of those Aurors were Aurors the last time I checked." Amelia Bones, who had made her way up to the front, quickly whispered to Dumbledore.

"Not good." Dumbledore commented as he quickly tried to assess the situation.

With a booming and very arrogant voice, Boggs spoke. "As the newly appointed Supreme Commander of the Auror Corps and in the name of Minister Fudge, I am ordering this gathering to disband immediately! Force will be used if you do not comply!"

The crowd immediately began to protest, the most prevalent argument being that Fudge no longer had the power to act as Minister of Magic.

Boggs was not to be hindered though. "Fudge is still Minister until you vote a new one in!" he shouted. "However, I'm here to see that you can't vote."

Courageously, Amelia Bones stepped up to the podium and in the most commanding voice she could muster, spoke. "As the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, I order you to stand down, Commander Boggs!"

"As Supreme Commander, my authority exceeds yours." Commander Boggs sneered from across the room.

An edgy silence descended over the room as crowd considered the danger of the Aurors, the Aurors observed the crowd, and the leaders tried to come up with a solution to the present situation.

The reverie was broken when Percy Weasley burst into the room. He was panting and it was apparent that he had been running. The crowd parted to allow him to make his way through and he stopped midway between Commander Boggs and the podium where Dumbledore, Bones, and Mockridge stood.

Dumbledore examined his former student with piercing eyes. Young Mr. Weasley was pale and quite obviously nervous. From the way that his eyes seemed to shift between Boggs, the crowd, and the podium, it was apparent that he was making a last-minute decision.

Finally, it could be seen by everyone watching close enough that Percy Weasley had made a decision. Little did anyone know that within a matter of seconds, his decision would forever make him a martyr.

"Those Aurors are Death Eaters!" Percy bellowed. "Fudge has signed a secret agreement with You-Know-Who!"

Commander Boggs snarled viciously at Percy and then in a startling move screamed the incantation for the killing curse. Dumbledore watched sadly as Percy Weasley was instantly hit and killed by the curse.

Everyone stood in shock and stared at the ambitious junior-under secretary's body. They were drawn from their shock when Mockridge, seizing the moment, stepped up to the podium and in a resounding

voice issued spoke. "I refuse to allow Death Eaters to take over this Ministry or country! Get them now!"

William Boggs was not necessarily a stupid man and happened to be competent enough to fight and perhaps even lead the new Death Eater-Aurors to victory against the aggressive crowd. However, he was also a coward and was currently standing on the front line. He chose to retreat and gave the command for all those under his command to activate their Portkeys.

Dumbledore impatiently waited for the crowd to calm down as soon as the ballroom was void of the DE-Aurors. As soon as Percy had made his announcement, it had become perfectly clear to Dumbledore that more trouble was afoot than ever before. Time could no longer be wasted. If he quibbled about who was to become Minister of Magic, the Ministry could quite possibly dissolve. Mockridge was a competent person and now had enough popularity that he could make a tremendous difference against Voldemort.

With this in mind, Dumbledore threw his support behind Mockridge as he stepped up to the podium and managed to coerce the crowd to return to a sense of order. "The vote of certiorari will continue." he announced calmly. "Will all those in favor of making Cuthbert Mockridge the Minister of Magic please say 'Aye?'"

A reverberating 'Aye' came from the audience. When Dumbledore asked for 'Nays,' none responded. Dumbledore then finished the official formalities. "As leader of the Wizengamot, I hereby recognize the validity of this vote of certiorari and declare that by unanimous vote, Cuthbert Mockridge is the Minister of Magic."

After Mockridge had departed for the Ministry, Harry had opted to stay behind at Gringotts and discuss his finances and assets with the goblins. Now that supposedly Mockridge would become Minister, Harry's properties and other things would become accessible to him once again.

Once he had finished his business, Harry stepped out into Diagon Alley appropriately disguised and made his way to Florean Fortescue's ice cream shop to buy some ice cream and take it back

to Nair'icaix to share with Bellatrix. He had noticed her eating large amounts of ice cream at random times lately.

An hour and a half after the negotiations had ended at Gringotts, Harry returned to Nair'icaix, ice cream in hand, to find a letter bearing the seal of the Ministry from Mockridge awaiting his pleasure on his desk.

Harry set the ice cream down, charmed it not to melt, and opened the letter and read the contents with surprise. He had not expected Mockridge to become the Minister so quickly. The details were sketchy as Mockridge had not had much time to write privately, but from them, Harry gathered with sadness that Percy Weasley had been killed and that there was a new nuisance to worry about in the form of one William Boggs.

Fudge's fall from power would not deter Boggs from carrying on with those who followed him. If Harry's suspicions were correct, the pseudo-Aurors would probably join Voldemort if they had not done so previously. The Death Eaters ranks had swelled.

Harry also feared that Boggs would lead a movement to overthrow Mockridge. Harry winced at his own cold-heartedness as he caught himself wishing that he could arrange for Fudge to be killed. Any such movement would certainly be led in Fudge's name.

All worries about the current situations were forgotten by Harry as his wife cheerfully entered his study. Bellatrix had apparently been able to detect his return. He smiled at her and pointed to the ice cream. "Hungry?"

"Always hungry for ice cream." Bellatrix said, grinning cheekily. She grabbed the ice cream package and made off with it.

"Hey!" Harry called after her in mock indignation, "You don't get it all!"

"I will if you don't come after me." Bellatrix yelled from the bedroom gleefully.

Harry made his way to the bedroom and found that Bellatrix had already served up the ice cream equally and was greedily digging in as she sat on the bed. Harry joined her and before they knew it, the treat was all gone.

The bowls, spoons, and empty carton automatically disappeared as Harry laid back on the bed. He looked up at Bellatrix and found her looking at him with a very satisfied smile from her sitting position next to him. "We should do that more often." he commented.

Bellatrix didn't answer as she shifted her position and laid down on her side next to Harry, propping herself up with her elbow. She reached out with her free hand lightly stroked Harry's chest. "There's something else we should do more often." she purred. Before he could answer, she brought her head down to his and initiated a long kiss.

The morning was nearly over before Harry woke up to find Bellatrix spooned against him, already awake, and lightly caressing one of the hands he had wrapped around her. She turned her head up to get a better view of his face from her position. "Good morning, sleepyhead."

"It's your fault that I was up so late." Harry whispered.

"You're the one who got the ice cream." Bellatrix murmured.

Harry unwrapped his arms from around her and the two sat up and stretched. They then proceeded to go through their morning routine and were soon enjoying their breakfast for lunch. Harry was idly wondering what to spend the rest of the day doing when Bellatrix spoke.

"I have some good news for you." Bellatrix said carefully.

"Oh?"

Bellatrix looked at him carefully before proceeding. "Hermione has managed to cling to her belief of your innocence."

“I’m glad of that.” Harry said. “It shows that she is not so weak after all. Maybe she’ll get some others to believe as well.”

“That’s not all.”

“Oh?”

“She managed to get washed up onto the island. Captain Nailoff arrested her for trespassing and then Hiscophney identified her as a member of the Order. Nailoff then had her locked up in the dungeon.”

This caused Harry to raise his eyebrows in surprise as he munched on a piece of toast. “Interesting. Why did she decide to seek me out?”

“I interviewed her yesterday while you were gone. She wants to talk to you, apologize, and all that stuff.” Bellatrix informed Harry.

Harry’s eyes grew slightly hard. “I don’t think I want to talk to her. Tell her that I won’t go and try to get revenge on her and to mind her own business in the future, then release her.”

“ You need to talk to her, Harry.” Bellatrix said calmly and persuasively. “This isn’t something that you can brush off.”

This caused Harry to become rather grumpy. However, Bellatrix was his wife and he respected her and her sense about things. “All right, a small talk.”

After lunch concluded, Bellatrix tracked down Nailoff and the three made their way down to the lower reaches of Nair’icaix’s dungeons. They soon arrived at Hermione’s cell to find that Nailoff had sent a guard ahead to prepare for the interview.

Harry stepped in the cell with Bellatrix on his heels to discover with surprise, a scantily-clad Hermione whose arms suspended above her by a hook connected to chains that shackled her wrists together. Hermione blushed slightly as she looked at Harry and squirmed uncomfortably.

Wishing to move along, Harry spoke. “Bellatrix says that you want to speak with me.”

“I came to apologize.” Hermione said weakly. “I’m sorry for believing that you were a murderer and I’m sorry for creating so much trouble for you. I’m also sorry for what I’ve said about you.”

“Fine.” Harry replied. “You apologized. Now leave me alone.”

“I’m not finished.” Hermione said bravely. “I w-want to make things up to you. I want to earn your forgiveness so that we can at least be friends again. I’ll help you with your fight against V-voldemort.”

An irrational anger suddenly coursed through Harry’s veins. With a snarl he stepped forward and delivered a stinging slap to Hermione’s face. Instead of crying out, she turned her other cheek toward him. This enraged Harry even more and he slapped her again.

Suddenly, Bellatrix’s hand was on his shoulder. “Calm down, Harry.” she whispered.

Breathing heavily from anger, Harry looked at Hermione who was now looking back at him with silent tears streaming down her face, both her cheeks bearing his hand-print. “You can’t earn forgiveness! It’s a gift that I must choose to give!” he growled.

“I realize that.” Hermione said, now sobbing. “But I can’t accept your gift of forgiveness without feeling that I’m worthy of it in some way. Please, either punish me for my betrayal or allow me to do something that will make things up.”

Harry was not in a mood to keep talking so he made a valiant attempt to end the confrontation. “I’ll see to it that you return home safely. I’ve accepted your apology and will not seek vengeance against you. Just leave me alone!”

“I’ll come back.” Hermione declared with resolve. “I’m determined.”

"You want to feel worthy of my forgiveness." Harry stated. "What makes you think that I'll ever give it you?"

Hermione looked Harry in the eye for a moment before letting her head hang and then spoke despondently. "Please consider forgiving me, Harry. If you do, not only will I accept whatever task or punishment you set, I'll promise to serve you for the rest of my life. If you don't want to forgive me, then please- take my life. I can't bear to live without your forgiveness. You can even send for your count and have him chop off my head." At this point her voice trembled. "If you kill me, at least tell my parents that I loved them."

Harry didn't want to forgive Hermione, but neither did he want to kill or have her killed. The very idea repulsed him to no end. There were so many emotions running through Harry's mind that he was unable to think. Letting out a noise that was somewhere between a snarl and a sob, he bolted from the cell.

Bellatrix immediately exited the cell and found Captain Nailoff. "Which way did my husband go?"

Nailoff pointed back toward the way they had come. "That way, milady."

"Would you and your guards please go look after him until I come up? Don't get in his face, just keep an eye on him."

"Of course, milady." Nailoff replied. "Do you need our help with the prisoner?"

"She is completely harmless. If she was a danger, Harry would have remained." Bellatrix stated firmly. "I'll look after her."

"Very good." Nailoff said before quickly making his way with the other guard up to the main level of Nair'icaix.

Bellatrix returned to the cell and had the hook holding Hermione's arms up disappear. The teenage girl then sank to the floor slowly.

The tears were still streaming down her face but she had stopped making crying sounds.

“It’s okay.” Bellatrix said in what she hoped was a soothing voice. “Don’t worry too much.”

“When is he going to do it?”

“Do what?”

“Have Count Trazkaban cut off my head.” Hermione replied in a resigned voice.

Bellatrix regarded Hermione with a cool stare before following Harry’s example and slapping the girl. “My husband is not a murderer.” Bellatrix declared with gritted teeth. “I thought that you had just established that fact in your mind.” Hermione took one look at Bellatrix and burst out into sobs again.

“I’m sorry.” Hermione said as soon as she gained control of herself.

“Good.” Bellatrix said. “Now, I know that Harry will eventually come around. It’s only a matter of time. What is it that you want to do in order to make yourself ‘feel worthy’ of his forgiveness?”

Hermione considered this for several long moments. “I said that if he forgave me, I would serve him for the rest of my life in addition to my earning his forgiveness. Therefore, it’ll have to be punishment.”

“ My husband doesn’t administer punishment either.” Bellatrix informed Hermione gently. “It’ll have to be some sort of penance that you carry out yourself. I’ll try to find some ideas. As soon as Harry calms down and has time to rationalize, I’ll try to work on his feelings. Meanwhile, don’t let yourself get too low.”

Hermione nodded at the encouragement from Bellatrix. “Thank you.”

“I’d better find Harry.” Bellatrix announced. “I’ll try to keep you updated.”

“Okay.”

Bellatrix then left the cell, making plans as how to best comfort Harry and calm the confusion that must be raging in his mind. He was obviously repulsed by the idea of killing Hermione and angry about her asking for forgiveness. Then of course, his initial reaction of slapping her twice would prey upon his feelings and cause a large amount of guilt. Despite the obstacles, Bellatrix was confident that Harry would eventually forgive Hermione. For that, she revered him.

A/N: Certiorari is where four justices of the United States Supreme Court sign a writ which allows a case to be heard before the court. Obviously, I've adapted the use of the word a bit

Chapter Thirty-Three

Using her ring as a guide to find Harry, Bellatrix exited Nair'icaix's dungeons and then made her way out to the rocky beach that surrounded the black castle. She found Harry chucking rocks into the ocean. Captain Nailoff and some of his men were casually walking about a small distance away from him.

Bellatrix approached Harry and silently watched for several minutes as he continued to throw small rocks as far as he could. Eventually, he slowed down, and then stopped throwing rocks altogether.

"I guess I lost control." Harry said dully to Bellatrix.

"It happens to the best of us." Bellatrix commented.

"She's so stubborn." Harry picked up another rock and fiercely threw it to punctuate his comment and express his opinion about Hermione. "If I kick her off the island she'll come back. If I forgive her she'll insist on 'earning' her forgiveness and she'll spend the rest of her life clinging to me. If I refuse to forgive her, she'll beg for me to kill her or worse, commit suicide."

"What will you do then?" Bellatrix asked.

Harry sighed, shrugged, and sat down on the hard beach, opting to study the water of the ocean rather than to throw things at it.

Bellatrix joined him, wincing as she maneuvered to avoid some of the sharper rocks. "Hermione realizes what she has done and wants to apologize and make amends. She also wants to try and patch up your former friendship. This should be easy for you because she will do anything at all in order to accomplish what she wants."

"I just want her to be sorry and leave me alone. Now that I look at the situation more closely, I suppose I can understand why she believed them and what she did, so I suppose I can forgive her if she doesn't make it hard." Harry mumbled. "I don't want her serving me

the rest of her life, I don't want to kill her, and I don't want to punish her."

It was very hard for Bellatrix to hold back a sigh of exasperation. It didn't help that she couldn't decide who it was that was responsible for the issue at hand either- Hermione for her persistence or Harry for his stubbornness. 'Compromise,' she told herself. 'There needs to be a compromise.'

"Harry, you just said that you want her to be sorry." Bellatrix pointed out and then went on. "You can simply let it go and know that she's sorry and therefore forgive her."

"I don't want her making me uncomfortable." Harry added in.

Bellatrix nodded. "That's fine. If she doesn't feel like she deserves your forgiveness then it's her problem and she needs to work it out by herself, right?"

"Absolutely."

A small smile crossed Bellatrix's lips. "That isn't so hard. I'll go and talk to Hermione about how you feel. It's apparent that you're willing to put this whole thing in the past and forget about it. I'll tell her that you'll freely forgive her if she'll also put it in the past. Will that make you comfortable?"

"Yes." Harry nodded, relief apparent in his whole posture. "But, I don't want her trying to force the re-growth of our friendship. That will have to take time and I want to be the one who initiates anything in that regard. I'll do so when I'm comfortable doing so."

"I'll let her know that." Bellatrix informed Harry, happy that he was able to work through everything and be able to let it go.

Voldemort would have never let such a slight to his character go so unpunished. "You'll need to at least tell her that you forgive her to her face."

"I don't feel like facing her now." Harry sighed.

"That's okay." Bellatrix told him. "I think that waiting for a little while would be best myself. If you don't mind, I think I'll go back and talk to Hermione."

"Go ahead." Harry said, sounding much more relaxed.

Bellatrix nodded, stood up, and began to slowly make her way back to the castle. Just before she passed out of ear-shot, Harry called out to her. "Get her some clothes and better accommodations. Having her chained up and barely clothed was embarrassing!"

"As you wish." Bellatrix yelled back, glad to see that his mind had moved onto what she considered to be more trivial things.

Hermione sat huddled in a corner of her cell hugging herself to fight off the chilly air that seemed to be inescapable. Once she had calmed down after Bellatrix's departure, she had begun reflecting on the confrontation with Harry. Now that she looked back on the whole conversation, Hermione realized that she had put Harry on the spot and had probably embarrassed him to no end.

That meant that he would probably go out of his way to avoid thinking and or dealing with her situation. It was very fortunate that Bellatrix was present and had taken an interest in her situation. Hermione suspected that if not for Bellatrix, she would be down here without any hope of getting out.

Just as Hermione's thoughts began to drift toward worst-case scenarios, she heard footsteps echoing down the long hall that her cell was situated on. This caused Hermione's hopes to soar. Had Harry calmed down and felt guilty? Had Bellatrix already convinced him to forgive her?

She was somewhat disappointed when only Bellatrix appeared but was excited to see that Bellatrix wore a smile on her face and was carrying something- presumably for her. "Has Harry made a

decision?” Hermione asked, with a nervous quaver in her voice. Maybe he had decided to send for Count Trazkaban.

“You could say that.” Bellatrix replied as she opened Hermione’s cell with magic and stepped in.

“I helped him sort out his feeling and get to the root of things. He’s perfectly willing to forgive you and put things in the past if you will leave him alone and also put everything in the past.”

The smile that had grown on Hermione’s face slipped when Bellatrix stated the last clause of the agreement. “That won’t do.” Hermione told Bellatrix sadly. “That way he’ll always remember that I betrayed him. We’ll have supposedly put it in the past, but he’ll always remember.”

“You make Harry’s feelings seem more complicated than they really are.” Bellatrix said. “He’s perfectly willing to re-instate your former friendship so long as you let him be the one who does it when he is ready. Making him ill at ease will not help your situation.” Bellatrix then threw the bundle she had been carrying at Hermione. “Get up and put these on. You’re being moved to a room upstairs.” Her tone brooked no opposition.

Slowly, Hermione stood up, shed her undergarments and put on the new clothes that fit perfectly. As she did so, she continued the conversation with Bellatrix. “But I still feel guilty. I need to do something to make things right.”

“Harry has decided that any issues you have with accepting his forgiveness are your own problem.” Bellatrix stated, motioning for Hermione to follow her out of the cell once Hermione had finished dressing in the clothes that greatly resembled the basic Hogwarts uniform.

“ Meaning that he doesn’t want to punish me or accept any reparations. Typical.” Hermione retorted.

Bellatrix smiled broadly for two reasons. That was indeed typical Harry, and she loved him for it. Secondly, it was apparent that Hermione's spirit was far from broken. "That means you can just put this behind you." Bellatrix told Hermione as they began their climb up a flight of stairs.

"I can't put this behind me." Hermione replied firmly.

"Are you so prideful that you cannot accept Harry's plain forgiveness and move on?" Bellatrix said in a somewhat harsh voice, trying to convince Hermione that she was going a little too far. "Is this because you cannot stand to be in his debt?"

"No matter what I do, I'll always be in Harry's debt." Hermione replied angrily but with a resolute voice which then dropped to a whisper. "The guilt won't go away until I feel that I've paid the price for what I've done."

Bellatrix remained silent for a few moments as she contemplated some ideas that would help Hermione recover from her extreme guilt with a minimum of hassle for Harry. Finally she came up with an idea. "Is there a way that you can significantly contribute to the fight against Voldemort? Helping Harry get the upper hand over Voldemort is the best way that you could redeem yourself in his eyes."

"My powers are insignificant compared to his." Hermione sighed. "What do I have to offer?"

Silence fell over them as the two carefully considered how Hermione could help out. Bellatrix's eyes lit up as she received a sudden inspiration. "You got kidnapped because you tried to confront Harry didn't you?"

"Yes." Hermione answered. "What does that have to do with it?"

"You were able to figure out where the attack was going to happen before it occurred." Bellatrix pointed out to Hermione eagerly. "If you could do it again, Harry's forces would be able to lay in wait and then

keep the Death Eaters fighting long enough for the Ministry to arrive and see that Harry is not the one attacking all of those villages."

"You're right!" Hermione exclaimed, the excitement evident in her voice. "That would prove that he is innocent!"

Bellatrix shook her head. "Not quite. But it would prove that he's not attacking villages. There are other things he's supposedly guilty of that would take a little more effort to clear up."

Hermione nodded but was obviously not listening very closely. "I can still remember how the pattern works. If you have a map with all of the latest attacks on them and the times that they occurred, I can tell you where Voldemort will next strike!"

"I'm sure that one of Harry's assistants has that information lying around, if not necessarily organized already." Bellatrix said. "Let's go and find out."

Harry was carefully polishing both his Black Ash and Ivory wands when Bellatrix entered his personal study. "I know which village Voldemort is going to attack tomorrow and I have a pretty good idea as to what time it will happen," she announced as she promptly laid a map on Harry's desk.

"Are you sure? How did you find out?" Harry asked as he sheathed his wands into their appropriate places on his person.

"Hermione did it." Bellatrix told him. She then recounted how Hermione had figured out the pattern to the attacks and how they had figured out that they could still use that pattern. She graciously gave all of the credit to Hermione.

Harry frowned. "I should have thought to have asked Hermione for help with that beforehand. That's one of the reasons Fudge was overthrown so easily. He should have been able to at least match or have someone else match Hermione's achievement."

“That doesn’t matter now.” Bellatrix said. “You have the information right here in front of your face. Send for Hiscophney and Neville and prepare a counterattack for tomorrow evening. You can make it ten times easier for Mockridge to set things right if you can publicly prove that you’re no the one attacking the villages.”

“Okay, I’ll have them stop over as soon as possible.” Harry responded positively. He then hesitated for a moment. “Tell Hermione that I’m grateful too.”

Bellatrix smiled at him. “She’ll be ecstatic to hear that, Harry.”

“It’s about time that Voldemort got a surprise.” Neville said, barely able to hide his enthusiasm at the prospect of a battle coming off in Harry’s favor.

Hiscophney was more reserved. “Is there any possible way that Voldemort might be aware of your knowing where his next attack should be?”

“It’s very doubtful.” Harry said, reassuring Hiscophney and Neville.

“I don’t know if we should involve Potter’s Legion,” Hiscophney said as he studied the map that marked the village in question. “We don’t know that they’re adequately prepared yet and we may wish to hold them back for when they are more desperately needed.”

“I think that this will give us some proper experience.” Neville said defensively. “This is the best situation to get experience in as well. We have the element of surprise on our side and we can easily position everyone in safe places to observe and even help fight.”

“Maybe,” Hiscophney muttered doubtfully.

Harry joined Hiscophney in looking at the map for the umpteenth time. “I think that Neville is somewhat right,” he said. “I’m going to allow PL to participate in this one with only one restriction. No underage magic must occur.”

“Fair enough,” Neville agreed.

“As you wish, my lord,” Hiscophney stated respectfully. “If you don’t mind, I think that I shall return to Trazkaban and begin planning for the battle. Do you intend to participate?”

“I think that I had better.” Harry said resolutely. “Voldemort will likely be there and he could wreak some serious havoc if not checked to some degree.”

“Tomorrow then,” Hiscophney said with a bow before he disappeared.

Neville smiled at Harry. “I’d better get home myself. Gran will be worried about me.” He handed Harry a sealed letter. “Could you give that to your wife? She requested it.”

“I shall.” Harry said, taking the letter gingerly, realizing that Neville had poured his heart into the letter and that it was extremely valuable.

“Thank you.” Neville said. With that, he activated his Portkey and he disappeared.

Harry cheerfully walked to the master suite to find Bellatrix reading a book on the bed, wearing her customary Muggle t-shirt for pajamas. “Everything is set for tomorrow.”

Bellatrix looked up with a smile and put the book aside. “That’s wonderful.”

“Neville asked me to give you this.” Harry stated, holding out the sealed letter for Bellatrix to take.

“I was wondering when it would come.” Bellatrix said apprehensively as she took the letter. She held it in her hands and silently studied it before using her trembling hands to place it on the nightstand. “I’ll need your help when I open it and perform my experiment.” She whispered to Harry.

Harry nodded as he changed into his nightwear and climbed into bed. The bedroom lights automatically snuffed themselves out. As soon as he had settled down, Bellatrix snuggled up to him and buried her face in his chest.

Instinctively, Harry realized that the delivery of the letter had reminded Bellatrix of the part she had played in torturing Neville's parents and that she was already anticipating what emotions about the loss of his parents Neville had expressed within the letter. He began to lightly stroke her back and hair. "I'm sure that he doesn't hold it against you any longer."

In response, Bellatrix began to sob as she clung to Harry tighter.

Chapter 34

By: Claihmsolais

Morning came, and with it a strange sight for a small town on Britain's east shore. If any muggle had been in the forests surrounding Southhallerton, they would have been witness to scores upon scores of strange people appearing out of thin air, groups of them holding on to miscalleneaous objects like old shoes, branches, ropes, and chains. Most of them wore grey cloaks, some carried weapons, while others wore black cloaks with the Hogwarts crest embroidered on them – not that any muggle would actually recognized the crest for what it was.

Harry took a moment to gather his bearings after the portkeys had deposited him and Hiscophney's troops in the forest. Seconds later, Neville arrived via portkeys fashioned by Remus and Snape, with about a dozen members of Potters Legion, bringing their overall numbers to fifty, including Harry and Hiscophney. Bellatrix had insisted on accompanying them, but Harry had pointed out that she needed to work on the potion to heal the mental damage done to the Longbottoms, and that, after reading Neville's letter, she was hardly in any state to do battle. Reluctantly, she had agreed, but not before extracting a promise from him to return unharmed.

“Tempus,” Harry muttered, and the time appeared in glowing numbers at the tip of his wand. Seven-thirty in the morning. According to Hermione’s prediction, Voldemort would attack the town between nine and eleven, giving them a two-hour window. Harry just hoped that the message he had sent to Mockridge had been received, and that the Aurors didn’t arrive too late to do any good. Shaking the thought from his head, Harry turned his attention to Hiscophney and Neville, as the Count conjured up an ethereal map of the terrain.

“This,” Hiscophney indicated, “is the area around the town. If Voldemort’s men follow their usual pattern, they will apparate in close to the town square, and fan out radially to cause as much havoc as they can during the few minutes they will be here.” Glowing red dots

appeared on the map where the town center would be as he manipulated the projection.

Harry nodded. "We know he usually doesn't bring more than thirty or so Death Eaters, so we'll have numbers on him. Their attacks usually last ten minutes, to half an hour at most. That means we will have to attack them when they are close together, so we can take down as many as we can before they retreat."

"That would be dangerous, though." Neville frowned as both Harry and Hiscophney turned to him at his comment, causing him to explain further. "I mean, if there's more of them close together, they will be able to defend themselves better. Plus, if they're attacked close together, what's to keep them from just apparating out the instant they come under attack?"

"Good point," Hiscophney conceded. "I can have five of my people put up an anti-apparition ward the moment Voldemort and his people appear, but that would also prevent the Aurors from arriving."

Harry studied the map for a minute, before pointing at a number of streets that ran outwards from the town center. "Let's assume they stick to the roads, they'd have to fan out along these, right? So what if we let them walk a few hundred yards, then take them down in small groups? They wouldn't be able to warn each other, and we have numbers on them. Worst case a few of them apparate away, leaving the other groups unaware of an attack on them."

"I have an idea." Hiscophney stared at the projection of the town, and the red dots began spreading out along the streets. "We wait till they are relatively dispersed, then spring out assault groups on them." Blue dots appeared on the map, next to the spread-out red ones. "At the same time, we engage localized anti-portkey and anti-apparition fields to keep from running."

As he spoke, translucent green domes spread across the concentrations of red and blue dots. "That way, the Aurors can portkey or apparate into the town center, and we have enough people

to at least contain them inside the fields. I assume the Aurors are smart enough to follow their ears to the battle?" Hiscophney finished.

"Probably." Harry nodded, the plan sounded good. "Here's an addition to the plan," he said as he waved his wand and conjured up a box filled with necklaces.

"What are these?" Neville fished one out of the box. It was a simple copper pendant engraved with the crest of Polairix strung on a leather string.

"Charmed pendants," Harry explained. "Touch them, to activate, and say the receiver's name, or say 'all' to send to everyone, then speak. It's basically a version of the muggle two-way radio, so it should allow us all to stay in contact."

Hiscophney picked one out of the box and examined it carefully, then nodded in satisfaction. "Good. That will give us another advantage. We will be able to call each other and report, or call for help if necessary."

"Nice charm work, Harry," Neville commented with a grin.

"Not mine. Bella charmed them late last night." Harry shrugged. "I'm not anywhere near her level of skill when it comes to charms or transfiguration."

Hiscophney waved over one of his men, and ordered him to hand out the pendants to the sorcerers and the students from Potter's Legion. When the man had left, the Count returned to the map. "There are five main roads leading out from the town center. Optimistically, Voldemort will show up with thirty people, that gives us five-on-three odds at each interception point."

"Right. Station five people ahead of where you want to intercept the Death Eaters, and have the other five swing around to pin them down. That should hopefully keep them there. One person from each five-man group will have to trail behind, casting an anti-apparition or anti-portkey ward before joining the fighting, make sure they know that."

Harry pointed at the green domes. "It's really important those wards go up in time."

The town clock chimed ten, and the town was now alive with people milling around the streets, shopping for groceries, catching a late breakfast, or an early lunch. Some people just returned to their homes after a night shift at work, while cafes and restaurants were busy opening their doors. Unbeknownst to the muggles, ten teams of five wizards each were posted around the town center, and the tension at each of these was thick enough to cut with a knife. They had a lot riding on this attack – including Lord Polairix's public rehabilitation. If they could discredit Voldemort's attempts at branding Harry as the perpetrator of these attacks on muggles, his public influence would once more be a potent weapon against Voldemort and his Death Eaters.

Another twenty minutes passed, and Harry frowned as nothing happened. Could Hermione have been wrong? Maybe Voldemort, realizing that someone had been able to predict his pattern, had changed it? After all, he was aware that Hermione had already found him once, and he knew that the Ministry knew. This was their best shot at putting an end to these attacks – after this, Voldemort would definitely know something was up, and he would change tactics, but if he didn't show, not only would Harry loose this chance, but Mockridge would also be taking some heavy flak, if he had indeed managed to divert the division of Aurors Harry had requested.

Then the silence was broken by a series of staccado cracks as dozens of black robed and masked people apparated into the town square. Harry let out a relieved sigh and touched the pendant hanging around his neck. "Polairix to all. Targets just apparated in."

"Confirmed, Polairix. Spotters make out twenty-eight Death Eaters plus Voldemort," a voice he didn't know replied.

"Strike teams in position. Warders ready," Hiscophney reported.

Screams erupted below as the Death Eaters spread apart and spells began flying from their wands. Harry gritted his teeth as muggles

began falling, some dead, some convulsing in pain. He hated this, hated leaving them to suffer, but if they wanted to make sure they got the Death Eaters this time around, they couldn't afford to attack them too early.

"Now?" Neville asked over the pendant, his voice strained and pleading.

"Hold fire, repeat, hold fire for now." Count Hiscophney's voice was steely as he replied.

"Come on, get moving," Harry urged the Death Eaters under his breath as they slowly began to disperse. Most of the muggles had managed to escape, and only a handful of corpses remained in the town center. The fleeing muggles drew the Death Eaters down the roads, straight towards the ambushes they had set up. Harry, Hiscophney, and Neville had agreed that warning the muggles would not be a good idea. They would all be safe, true, but Voldemort would know something was up the instant they arrived and no one was in sight.

Harry watched with apprehension as a group of six Death Eaters came down the road towards their position, casting blasting hexes and other, more destructive curses at anything they saw. When they were a dozen yards away, Harry waved to the others in his group, and he, together with three others, sprang up from behind his cover and flicked his wand at the Death Eaters.

"Impedimenta! Stupefy! Incarcerous! Flippendo!"

A series of hexes and stunners left their wands as the glowing domes of anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards washed overhead. The Death Eaters, caught by surprise by the spellfire, screamed and dove for cover. One of them raised a panicked hand and pointed to the sky as their attempts to apparate away failed. Three of them fell in the initial barrage before they could find cover, and as Harry ducked back down behind the light post he was using for cover, more spells erupted from behind the Death Eaters, taking down the remaining three.

“Polairix, this is Alpha Team. Six targets down, area secure,” one of the teammembers that had ambushed the Death Eaters from behind reported. Harry nodded and waved his group forward, where they bound their captives.

“ Polairix, this is Beta Team, our targets are down,” Neville announced. “Targets secured for the Aurors.”

“Delta Team, targets secure.”

“Epsilon Team, targets down.”

“Gamma Team, Voldemort is here. Repeat, Voldemort is—“ the voice cut off abruptly, and Harry’s eyes widened. Gamma Team was Hiscophney’s, stationed two streets over.

Grabbing his pendant, Harry shouted, “All teams, secure and guard targets, all available people head to Gamma location!” He spared a glance for his group, then took off in a sprint, seven of his people following him, while two remained to guard the Death Eaters.

When they arrived at the other team’s location, Harry couldn’t help but gasp in horror. All of the Death Eaters were dead, and six of Hiscophney’s men were laying among them, unmoving. Through some miracle, the two members of Potter’s legion had survived, and had been herded away from the battle raging amongs the corpses by the last surviving sorcerer. Hiscophney and Voldemort were trading spells, with Voldemort almost stationary, turning only to target his curses at his opponent, who was having trouble maneuvering in the limited space provided by houses, trees, and lamp posts.

Hiscophney was holding his own, for the time being, but Harry could see the strain on the sorcerer’s face as he struggled to keep dodging the killing curse. Voldemort alternated his spellcasting enough to blast most of the available cover, and Hiscophney’s return fire was intercepted by ruthlessly summoned corpses. Harry came to a halt about a dozen yards from the fighting, and raised his wand. Voldemort either hadn’t noticed or was ignoring the arriving

reinforcements, and was focusing all of his attention on the Count. Well, he was going to have to change that.

Harry slipped the black ash wand back into his wrist holster and summoned his ivory wand. He would only get one shot at this, and he had to make it a good one. The remainder of the troops had arrived, and had formed a circle around the fighters, but none of them dared interfere with the duel. Levelling his wand at Voldemort's back, Harry gave it a deft flick.

"Scelus Efflix!" The spell had been one he had come across with Bella while they were searching through the library for combat spells that would be useful in a duel with Voldemort. While there wasn't anything really short of a killing curse that would be able to kill the person Voldemort, they had found a number of viable alternatives that would not involve Harry using an Unforgivable. The spell raced at Voldemort's back, but he turned and waved his wand in an arc in an instant, a shimmering silver barrier flashing into existence before him.

Harry's spell splashed against it harmlessly, and Voldemort jabbed his wand at his new target. "Eradico."

Diving to the side, Harry returned fire with a number of overpowered stunners, courtesy of his new wand, and Voldemort found himself distracted as Count Hiscophney took the opportunity to counter-attack, himself. Harry ran and ducked into an entryway while Voldemort's back was turned, and threw his own hexes and jinxes at the dark lord. Caught in the sudden crossfire, Voldemort roared in anger as one of Hiscophney's slashing spells carved a deep wound into his side as he dodged one of Harry's blasting curses. Three seconds later, Voldemort leapt to the side to avoid one of Hiscophney's spells, only to catch one of Harry's bludgeoning spells square in the back.

Roaring in fury, a wave of power washed outwards from Voldemort, causing the wards to dispell. The dark lord ignored the opportunity to flee, however, and flung out his wand, a wave of concussive force blasting Hiscophney off his feet. The Count landed hard on his back, and was obviously struggling to remain conscious. Harry, who had been somewhat shielded by the entryway, snarled and stepped into

the open before Voldemort could finish him off, speaking the first spell that came to mind.

“Expelliarmus!” Voldemort waved his wand and the jet of red light was deflected to impact an unfortunate tree.

“So,” he hissed, his snake-like face pale in the sunlight, “finally you show yourself, Potter – or maybe I should call you Lord Polairix? It appears I have underestimated you.”

Harry couldn’t help but notice the strange glint in the dark lords eyes as he took up a duelling stance. “Actually, you underestimated Hermione,” Harry replied, fighting to keep his voice even. “She figured it out, you know. It was a mistake to think that you could just let her go.”

“Would you have preferred that I kill the little mudblood, Potter?” Voldemort cackled.

“She broke the memory charm you put on her.”

That comment caused Voldemort’s eyes to widen until they were as close to bugging out as they would probably get. “What? That’s impossible,” he spat

“No, it isn’t,” Harry bluffed with a grin. It was a risky gamble, trying to get Voldemort riled up, but he had to keep him here until the Aurors arrived. Where’s the blasted Ministry when you need them?

“No matter.” Voldemort waved it off with a neutral expression. “It was foolish of you to come here, where I could kill you. Now, shall we finish what we started at the end of your fourth year, Potter?”

“You and me, Tom. The way it’s always been.”

“Prepare for death, then, Potter – Evertō!”

Harry ducked under the curse, and flicked his wand rapidly. He had trained with Bellatrix for this, worked on his duelling skill until she was

satisfied he would be able to hold his own – and Bella was a demanding teacher, if nothing else. A fire spell erupted from the tip of his wand with a muttered “Comburo,” which left it just a twist and quick jab away from the motion for a Sepelio. Wand motions flowed into each other as his body reacted on instinct, casting spell after spell without pause without even needing to mutter the incantations.

A freezing spell followed by a blasting curse and a stunner flew at Voldemort in rapid succession, forcing the dark lord to abort his counterattack. With a grand wave of his wand, Voldemort conjured up a translucent blue shield with a shout of “Aegis Contego!” All of Harry’s spells splashed against it, causing colorful ripples to wash across it, but none penetrated.

“Good, good, you’ve learned, Potter. Bella must’ve taught you well,” Voldemort taunted as he kept his wand steady and in position. Harry circled him slowly, trying to figure out a way to get past the shield, while his opponent seemed content to let him make the next move.

Finally, Harry shifted his stance, moving his weight forward, earning him a puzzled look from Voldemort. Spying a windowsill on the second floor on the building behind Voldemort, he held out his wand. “Admoveo!”

The summoning spell didn’t really work on something as massive as the building, instead causing Harry to fly up there. He kicked off the ledge, lifting himself higher into the air just seconds before Voldemort’s spells blasted the window into rubble. At the apex of his leap, Harry flicked his wand again, and cast the first spell he’d ever learned.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” And remember, swish-and-flick, he could hear Flitwick’s voice. The levitation spell kicked in, causing him to hover in mid-air, and Voldemort’s curses, which had been aimed at the spot he would have occupied, missed by a few feet. Harry smirked as he glanced down past his feet at Voldemort’s face, imagining the surprise that wasn’t showing on the snake-like visage. The levitation spell took an amount of energy proportional to the weight and height of the object levitated – human levitation usually

took ridiculous amounts of power, which was usually why it wasn't done. With his new wand, however, Harry had felt confident to try.

"What are you playing at, Potter!" Voldemort screeched on the ground and shot a killing curse up at Harry, but his target dodged aside as he levitated himself around.

"Why don't you come up here, Tom?" Harry smirked. "Accio Voldemort!"

With a startled yell, the dark lord rose into the air with surprising speed – like the levitation spell, the summoning spell was designed for small items, and summoning something as large and heavy as a person took tremendous amounts of energy, but Harry mused it was well worth the look of surprise on Voldemort's face as he shot past him, high up into the air. And this time, the surprise did show, even as Harry slowly levitated himself to the ground.

"Ventulus!" A gust of wind slammed into Voldemort, buffetting him around in the air above the rooftops, and Harry continued the flowing wand motion into the next spell, with a muttered "Sonitus Laedo." The shockwave exploding from his wand rattled windows for blocks around and disrupted Voldemort's attempt at casting the killing curse in retaliation.

When his feet touched the ground, Harry dispelled the levitation charm, and raised all of the shield spells he could think of, because when Voldemort came back – and Harry had no doubt that he would, and when he did, he would be pissed – he would need them. True to his prediction, a number of dark curses started raining from the sky, forcing Harry to seek shelter, as he didn't exactly want to test the effectiveness of his shields against an angry Voldemort's curses just yet.

"Arresto Momentum!" The yell echoed across the street, and Voldemort came to a stop an inch above the ground, his eyes wide with rage. "Potter! You will pay!" The hail of spells that followed caused Harry to duck back into cover; Voldemort was truly enraged, and the skill he was displaying, arraying spell after spell, weaving

them so tightly together without pause, was frightening. Harry had known that Voldemort was powerful, and the dark wizard had had decades to hone his duelling skills, but this – he was chaining spells so quickly that there was no opening, no chance to get in a counter-attack.

“Procella!”

The spell swept across the battlefield out of nowhere, the hurricane force wind tearing through the street. Voldemort was caught up in the middle of casting a spell and was forced to abandon it to barely remain standing, and Harry let out a sigh of relief as he spotted Albus Dumbledore standing at the other end of the street, Order members and a squad of Aurors behind him.

“Dumbledore!” Voldemort howled in anger as the old mage strode towards him.

“You’re surrounded, Tom,” Dumbledore said quietly.

“I can still kill your golden boy.” Jabbing his wand at the doorway Harry had sought cover in, Voldemort snarled as he began a spell. Dumbledore was casting, himself, when the dark lord disappeared with a crack, the spell he had been building dissipating harmlessly into the air.

“It was a feint,” Dumbledore mumbled with a hint of anger as he looked around the carnage that surrounded them. Corpses of Death Eaters and Trazkaban sorcerers were littering the ground, while the remainder of Hiscophney’s people and Potter’s Legion were bringing in the captives from the other interception points. Neville and the Count were approaching Harry, ignoring Dumbledore’s questioning glance.

“I’m sorry,” was the first thing Harry said to Hiscophney as soon as they were close enough. “You lost a lot of people today because of me.”

The Count waved it off. "That is the nature of warfare. We pledged our alliance to you, and we will uphold it. Voldemort is evil and must be stopped – and every one of them gave their lives gladly to see to it that he will be."

"We only lost people here," Neville told Harry. "I checked right after you and Voldemort started fighting. All of Potter's Legion are alive and accounted for, even if some are a bit worse for wear."

"How so?" Harry asked

"Scratches and bruises, a nothing major. I think Parvati was off the worst – she caught a bludgeoning hex in her shoulder, and it's dislocated. Nothing Madam Pomfrey can't fix."

"And," Hiscophney added, "we only lost six men today. We captured twenty-three Death Eaters, killed five, and you injured Voldemort."

Harry frowned. "But I didn't! None of my spells even came close to hitting him, not with that shield of his."

"Maybe not physically," Hiscophney laughed, "but you definitely injured his pride. You were duelling well, for someone with so little experience, my lord."

"Harry!" All three turned at the sound of Tonk's voice as she hurried over along with Kinglsey.

"Tonks! You're late," Harry greeted her. "Kingsley," he nodded at the older Auror.

"Sorry, Potter," Kingsley replied, "we got the message from the Minister, but there were a lot of bureaucrats trying to hold us back. We had to go behind their backs and talk to Dumbledore to get Order support in order to get the go for the deployment."

Harry's eyes widened in fear, but Tonks spoke before he could voice them. "Don't worry, we didn't tell them where the information was from. We just told them we had it from a reliable source that we could

pinpoint Voldemort's next attack. After all, Hermione did it before, right?"

"She did this one, too," Harry told her with a grin. The grin died when he saw Dumbledore walking over towards them. "Count, please tend to your people. The injured can be cared for at the fortress – Neville, if the injured from your group want to come along, they're welcome to, have the Count tell you how to use the emergency portkeys we set up."

The two nodded, understanding that Harry wanted his discussion with Dumbledore to be private, and left to tend to their people. Kingsley and Tonks caught the look, as well, and excused themselves to see to the captured Death Eaters.

"Harry," Dumbledore greeted him neutrally.

"Dumbledore."

"I suppose now I know what their mysterious source of information is," the headmaster noted. "And I am glad now that I trusted them. I may be an old man, but even I can see what this means, and the implications of this," he admitted.

Harry snorted. "Took something pretty obvious to believe my word over rumours, didn't it. Now, what else will it take? Let's see, you could've tested me with Veritaserum to see if I'd really killed those muggles in Privet Drive, but you didn't. Priori Incantatem was enough – does it ever occur to you that a wand can be stolen? Or maybe taken from an unconscious body?"

"Harry-

"No, of course not! Of course it didn't! But you know what?" Harry calmed himself down forcibly, "you know what? Azkaban was the best thing that ever happened to be, as unbelievable as that sounds, because it showed me what a traitorous, backstabbing lot you all are!"

Dumbledore stood in silence as his former student ranted, and as the dust from the battle settled around them, and the shame for his actions and mistrust settled inside him, there was only one thing that would come out of his mouth. “Could we talk?”

Harry stared at him for a long moment, and Dumbledore elaborated. “Just talk, no Aurors, no trying to take you into custody, no forcing you to help us out with the war. Just you and me, and whoever else you want to be present.” The old man sighed, suddenly feeling even older, as if it were possible. “I believe I owe you an apology for something I can never make up for.”

Chapter 35

By: Claihmsolais

"You can't seriously be thinking of going!" Bellatrix had been furious when she heard that Harry had fought Voldemort himself, but she had calmed down after Harry had told her he was fine – her fear had turned to pride when she realized he had managed to hold his own and get in a few good shots on Voldemort, but it came back with a vengeance when he told her of Dumbledore's offer to meet.

"I have to," Harry told her quietly. They were alone, for now. Everyone had retired for the night, Hiscophney had taken his injured and dead people back to his island to take care of them, and Neville had led the members of Potter's Legion back to London with a promise to be in touch. "By now, even Fudge can't deny that it was all one big setup by Voldemort, and that'll do quite a bit to clear my name, I hope."

Bella glared at him. "It may, but have you forgotten you're still under a life sentence in Azkaban for the murder of muggles? This may have cleared you of the attacks on muggle villages, but it doesn't have any bearing on what got you into this mess in the first place!"

Harry glared back stubbornly. "But now Voldemort realizes that we're on to him, and he'll switch tactics. He knows that everyone else knows that he's been trying to set me up, and he'll go for more direct attacks now. Also, we dealt him a pretty heavy blow, and from what I heard we captured at least a few members of his inner circle – not to mention what this is going to do to their morale. He'll attack, soon, and he'll make it big. He must, if he wants to prove to them he's still strong."

"And you'll be there to fight him." Bella sighed. "Harry, you can't fight him if the Ministry sticks you back into Azkaban – and believe me, I have no doubts that Fudge would do that without a moment's hesitation. Going to this meeting is a bad idea."

“No, it’s not,” Harry disagreed. “In fact, I think now’s the perfect time. Voldemort’s forced back on the offensive, and we know something big is coming. We need all the help we can get, and at the very least I can get them to stay out of my business. If we’re distracted by the Ministry or the Order showing up and get caught in the crossfire, there’s no telling how many people are going to die.”

“I don’t like it, but I see your point.” Bella frowned. “But if you’re going, I’m coming along!”

“No.” Harry shook his head decisively.

“But-“

“Bella, even if Dumbledore’s telling the truth – and at this point, I’m not so sure it isn’t an ambush – then he’s going to be talking to me. I’m not going to take the chance that he’ll suddenly turn on you, especially not since we haven’t cleared your name. You’re as much a wanted criminal as I am, if not more so, and Dumbledore has no reason to hold back on your account. Besides,” Harry added with a small grin, “if it is a trap, I’ll need someone to bust me out of jail. I kind of doubt they’d stick me back into Azkaban, seeing that it belongs to me.”

“Fine, but you’re taking guards. And Hiscophney, if he wants to come.”

“I’ll take the guards. Hiscophney needs to see that his people are properly buried and honored. Besides, I need you, Hiscophney, Xerina, Neville, Snape and Remus here, trying to figure out what target Voldemort is most likely to hit next. We need to be ready for that.”

“What about the Ministry?” Bella asked.

“Let me worry about the Ministry. If they’re not prepared to help, we can fight this war on our own. We just need to make sure they stay out of our way.” Harry shrugged. “We also need a long-term plan for dealing with Voldemort. I know the prophecy says I’ll kill him or he’ll

kill me, but at this point I don't know just how I'm going to accomplish that."

"I have a few ideas," Bella muttered quietly enough that Harry didn't hear. "I'll bring it up at the meeting. When did you set the meeting with Dumbledore?"

"Tomorrow afternoon. We're meeting in the Minister of Magic's office. Bert knows I'm coming – I sent him a message earlier. Hopefully it's enough of a neutral ground."

"Neutral ground?" Bella asked, alarmed. "You'll be surrounded by dozens of Aurors in the entire building, all of whom would like nothing better than to arrest you!"

Harry grinned. "But Bert's not going to let them arrest me. The Minister still holds ultimate authority over the law enforcement. There'll be a half-dozen guards standing outside the door, too, that Xerina sent over, so it should be fine. Any renegade Auror who'd want to arrest me against the Minister of Magic's explicit orders will have to get through them first. Well, and they'll have to get through me, too."

"I'd still feel better I came along."

"I know." Harry sighed at his wife's pout. "Look, you're working on something really important here, and the sooner we get Neville's parents cured, the sooner Dumbledore is going to get off my back about returning them. I don't know why he even thinks I'd use them, especially since I have no clue what kind of spell they were working on before...well, you know." He glanced at her, mentally kicking himself as he saw the tears she was holding back. Harry reached out and wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders to comfort her. "Hey, don't cry. It wasn't your fault. And even so, you're doing your best to fix it."

The rest of the night was spent in mutual comfort, thoughts of the following day forgotten as they both dwelled on the past.

Word had gotten around fast that Lord Polairix was innocent of the attacks on muggle villages, and word had also spread that he was anything but pleased with the accusations that had been hurled his way. So when he strode through the halls of the Ministry, presenting an imposing figure wrapped in a black cloak that billowed behind him, and his face hidden in the shadows of his hood, people made to get out of his way. They were helped along by the six heavily-armed ice soldiers that flanked Polairix, their polearms gleaming in the light, and their armor polished to perfection. Lord Polairix was here to make an impression, and that was exactly what he did.

The doors to the Minister's office flew open, startling one of the men sitting in the office. The other merely chuckled and waved him inside. With a nod to his guards, the six soldiers posted themselves outside the door. A wave of the hand closed the doors with much more gentleness than they'd opened with, and Lord Polairix lowered his hood. He grinned at Mockridge, who was clearly hiding a smile at Dumbledore's flustered expression, then gave his old headmaster a curt nod in acknowledgement, before sinking down in one of the chairs before the desk.

"So glad you could join us, Harry," Mockridge greeted him when Harry had shed his cloak and settled down.

"Well, hello to you, too, Bert. So, how's business today?" Harry shot back with a grin, ignoring Dumbledore for now. The old mage was watching the exchange with disbelief, speechless for one of the first times in his life.

"Oh, you know, same old, same old. Death Eater attacks, we're getting there too late. You know that raid you stopped? We managed to 'convince' a few of them to spill on their respective cells, so we're in the process of rooting them out," Mockridge explained.

"That was quick."

The Minister shrugged. "Well, we're at war. Don't really have the luxury to leave You-know-who to his devices, especially not with his nose as bloodied as it is."

“Very true,” Harry agreed.

“I suppose you’ve also heard about Fudge’s little rebellion?”
Mockridge arched an eyebrow when Harry shook his head negative.
“Well, when I was elected, a few fake Aurors stormed the hall under
Fudge’s leadership, apparently. The man seems to have gone
completely over the edge, and he’s probably joined up with the dark
lord by now. Who knows if that means he’s alive or dead.”

“Doesn’t really matter at this point. Fudge is insignificant if we can
get rid of Voldemort,” Harry agreed. He finally turned to Dumbledore.
“You said you wanted to talk? Well, talk, old man.”

“You – well – you two know each other?” Dumbledore asked, still a
little shaken as he glanced back and forth between the two men who
were conversing like old friends.

“Why, of course,” Harry nodded, “I’ve met Bert here quite a few
times. You know, back when he was the head of the Goblin Liaision
office.”

Mockridge grinned and added, “And Harry here was rather
instrumental in arranging for the re-opening of Gringotts. Without his
presence, I doubt the goblins would’ve listened to me at all. And
when he pointed out that our leadership was incompetent, well...” the
Minister shrugged.

“The chance presented itself to get someone into power who wasn’t
so quick to condemn me on sketchy circumstantial evidence that
could rather easily be explained away and the words of a few
opportunistic so-called ‘friends.’” Harry glared at Dumbledore. “I find it
interesting that a complete stranger was more willing to listen to me
and draw his own conclusions than my friends and the people who
were supposed to know me.”

“Harry-“

“Don’t even start on the apologies, Dumbledore. Just because you realized you screwed up now and feel guilty doesn’t make it all right. A few apologies and contrite faces can’t make what you did to me go away, can’t make the feelings of betrayal just vanish. You accused me at every turn, at every point, every time we met, without even giving me a chance to speak, and yet here you are, demanding I extend that courtesy to you? Unless you’ve got something to say relating to the war effort, I suggest you don’t speak to me.” Harry snorted in disgust.

Dumbledore sighed and nodded in defeat; the old mage had a feeling that Harry had already cut all ties with them the moment they’d damned him to Azkaban. The only thing that connected them now was the destruction of Voldemort, and the headmaster wasn’t entirely sure Harry needed their help in that endeavour. And if he didn’t, it could very well be that when all was said and done, the world had heard the last of Harry Potter. There was nothing that would hold him in the wizarding world, and even the conviction that had landed him in Azkaban could easily be overturned; after all, one would listen more to the highly influential, wealthy, and powerful Lord Polairix than Harry Potter, scapegoat-turned-hero of the day. Even his own arguments sounded weak and unfounded now that Dumbledore thought back to the trial. Harry had been right, they should have looked deeper, used Veritaserum, but everyone had been so hell-bent on their proverbial witch hunt that none cared. And it had caused this, brought them all to this point. So, he did the only thing he could – he conceded defeat.

“You’re right, of course, Harry. Despite the fact that it might mean nothing to you at all, though, I wanted to apologize for everything we’ve put you through.” The old man suddenly seemed even older as he spoke. “But more importantly, we need to discuss Voldemort.”

“That’s right,” Harry turned back to Mockridge. “I don’t suppose any of them spilled where Voldemort is hiding out at the moment?”

The Minister shook his head. “I’m afraid not. None of them were willing to, or even knew. Voldemort seems to have adjusted his tactics to using small-scale guerilla cells that are contacted and led by

members of his inner circle. We've gotten a good number of them, but the foot soldiers don't know and the circle members can't talk, since apparently the dark lord's hideout is under a modified version of the Fidelius. Their memories of its location were wiped the instant we treated them with Veritaserum, and our legilimancers confirmed that." Mockridge chuckled. "On a brighter note, though, they did reveal that Voldemort isn't happy at all about the bloody nose you gave him. A few Death Eaters even seem to think that he isn't as all-powerful as he claims to be."

"One defeat was all it took?" Harry snickered. "Looks like this is going to be easier than I thought it would. All we've got to do is rout his in a few places and his people are going to start leaving him." Man, wizards are cowards. Show any indication that there's someone stronger out there to follow, and they start making noises, he thought, though he kept it to himself.

"Right, but that's easier said than done," Mockridge noted. "He's going to be more careful where he plans his attacks from now on. I've already boosted the Auror corps and placed guards and warning wards around important targets I think he might be considering, like Diagon Alley, the Ministry, and Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, but we can't be everywhere at the same time. We also need a fast response group that can react quickly to any reported attacks." The Minister shrugged helplessly. "We simply don't have the manpower to guard every possible target and strike back."

"The Order has been helping out with that," Dumbledore informed Harry, "we've been securing potential targets, as well, and we've been trying to figure out where Voldemort would attack next, but Severus reports that he keeps his plans under tight lock and key."

Harry grinned at the mention of the Potions professor. "Well, then, I think I can solve the manpower issue for you. Before I left, I sent a request to Queen Xerina of the Ice people for a couple of contingents of troops, and Count Trazkaban has been putting together a rather considerable force of sorcerers already. As for figuring out where the next attack is going to be...well, I'd put my odds on it being an

underdefended place with lots of potential for civilian casualties and collateral damage. Something like the middle of a wizarding village.”

“Why’s that?” Dumbledore asked, curious. The suggestion was something he hadn’t thought of before, and it hadn’t come up in any Order meeting, either.

“Simple.” Harry smiled grimly. “If I was some maniac who ruled through fear and intimidation, and I’d just been dealt a nasty blow to my pride, I’d be damn well looking for a place to attack that would be lightly guarded if at all, where my minions could kill to their hearts’ content without worrying about taking casualties. If he blows up a wizarding town, no matter how small, it’s going to be all over the papers the next day, and the death count is going to be ludicrously high, especially if it’s an out-of-the-way town. That’ll convince people that he’s still all-powerful and intimidate them into following him again.”

“But wouldn’t he rather attack a target of importance? That would make much more of an impact on the public opinion than massacring a random town, especially if he’s out to take over the wizarding world?” Dumbledore asked.

Surprisingly, it was Mockridge who answered as realization dawned in the man’s eyes. “I see. He’s not going to risk casualties in an assault on an important target while his followers are uneasy. It’d be much easier to intimidate the populace some more, regain support, and then attack important targets with fanatically loyal followers instead ones that have doubts about him.”

“Exactly,” Harry nodded. “Also, if he attacks an unguarded town, the public will demand you pull Aurors from their current posts and place them around the country to protect the villages and communities, weakening your defenses here.”

“It’s a good plan,” Mockridge admitted reluctantly. “We don’t have the forces to stop him from attacking anywhere else, and if we do, he’ll just attack here. We’re stuck.”

"There's something we can do," Harry told him. "We can strike first. We take out more of his powerbase and force him to act...force him to attack a target of our choice."

"I don't know," Dumbledore mused, "getting Voldemort desperate enough to commit to an attack he was forced into seems dangerous. We don't know what he's capable of when he's cornered that way."

"Are you kidding me?!" Harry burst out. "Whatever he's going to do when we've got him where we want him can't be any worse than what he's doing right now! He's killing innocent people, unchecked, because he's running the exact kind of warfare he knows you can't defend against!" Like the people in Southhallerton, Harry thought darkly. Logically he knew that there had been nothing he could've done; doing anything to save the populace would have cost them their best shot at Voldemort, but that didn't make it any easier to live with. Seventeen, he thought. Seventeen muggles had died in the attack before the trap had been sprung.

He had requested that the cleanup teams Hiscophney had sent collect the names of the dead and place them on a small memorial marker. Despite Bella's insistence, he had asked to know who and how many of them had died, because they had been his responsibility, because they had been his fault. He'd gotten over beating himself up to try and find a better way to stop Voldemort – barely, with a lot of coaching from Bella and Neville and Xerina and Hiscophney, but he knew that it wasn't over. He would remember them when this war was over, because that was the least he owed them. He pushed his guilt and remorse aside for the moment, because he had a war to lead, and Voldemort would only be too happy to take advantage of any openings he gave him. The good of the many outweighs the good of the few, Harry thought bitterly.

"You don't know Voldemort," Dumbledore insisted. "You have no idea what he's capable of, what atrocities he is willing to commit when he is desperate. The people live in fear of him for good reason, and to force him into a corner will only make things worse!"

“I don’t know what Voldemort’s capable of?” Harry barked out a semi-hysteric laughter. “I’ve been having nightmares and visions of what he’s done since I was eleven! I’ve met the guy, witnessed what he’s done, and you’re telling me I don’t know what he can do? I’ve seen the aftermath of destroyed muggle villages, the mutilated corpses he’s left behind – I’ve seen the remainder of dark curses so evil you could feel it!”

The two older men watched in apprehension as Harry’s laughter grew more hysteric, until he’d given up ranting in favor of just laughing like a madman, tears streaming down his face. Dumbledore merely hung his head; he knew he’d hit all the wrong spots with his reply, though he’d only been genuinely worried about the dark lord’s response to their offensive. Mockridge, on the other hand, was beginning to wonder if Harry was at all stable, and if the fate of the wizarding world didn’t rest on a maniac who was as insane as the one they were trying to get rid of. He could understand Harry’s frustration, but he hoped the young wizard would be able to work through it, because if Harry went insane, there was nothing that could save the wizarding world from ruin.

It took several minutes for Harry to calm down, but when he did, there was nothing left of the insanity he’d shown earlier, his face neutral. “Anyway, Dumbledore, don’t tell me I don’t know what Voldemort is capable of,” he hissed dangerously, not bothering to apologize for his outburst. “Either way, I don’t need your approval, and I certainly could care less if you don’t like what I’m going to do, because, like it or not, I’m declaring war on Voldemort, and to be perfectly honest, the only thing that would concern you is how many of your people are going to get caught in the crossfire.”

“No one here is going to oppose you in that,” Mockridge noted calmly, trying to smooth over the proverbial ruffled phoenix feathers. “I think what Professor Dumbledore was alluding to was that Voldemort may become unpredictable when we force his hand, and that if we are not careful, may end up making our situation worse.”

“That is precisely why we need to take him out, and quickly. Now, we’ve been working out a plan, and it would be a great help if the

Ministry would at the very least not oppose us." Harry stared at Dumbledore, as if daring the man to say more, his temper barely kept in check.

"We all can agree that we're on the same side here. Now, what was that plan you've been working on, Harry?" Mockridge leaned forward in his chair, interposing himself as much as he could between Dumbledore and Harry.

"Continue a public campaign against Voldemort and his supporters, for starters. Re-open all the newspapers and news agencies without the biased bull Fudge had them publish, and publicize any and all victories against Death Eaters. Take the war to the people, close down the Gringotts accounts of all known Death Eaters, put up wanted pictures, and generally deny them their financial and public resources. This'll also make it harder for them to appear in public, and if you urge the people to report any suspicious activity, you can be sure that you'll find Death Eaters or Death Eater wannabes somewhere." Harry ticked off his fingers. "Also, we know Voldemort is going to be planning something big. Warn the populace to stay in their homes, ward themselves, and if they see Death Eaters anywhere close by, take the opportunity and run."

"I thought you said you wanted to strike before he did?"

Harry nodded. "That's the idea. That way, if we can deprive him of the first strike, we can move him towards a target of our choosing. My allies are still working out where the best and most probable location would be. If you want, I can inform you once we've chosen a target. The attack will hopefully happen within the next two or three days so Voldemort won't have time to pick his target. You'll understand if I only send the message to you, Bert. We don't know who we can trust in the Ministry, especially not with Fudge's recent escapade."

"And how do you plan on making him attack a specific target? Voldemort is rather difficult to predict, and the fact that we have so many potential targets must be a blessing for him," Dumbledore chimed in, stroking his beard after the old mage had regained his composure.

Harry grinned toothily. "Simple. We give him an opportunity he can't pass up." The lord of Polairix stood up and spread his arms. "Move all the Aurors away from the Ministry, and make sure Voldemort knows I'm here. Trust me, he will come."

"That's preposterous!" Mockridge exclaimed, shocked. "What you're proposing is that you'll duel Voldemort by yourself, and you'll be using yourself as a bait to lure him and however many of his troops he's going to bring here?"

"Maybe," Harry acknowledged, "but unless you've got a better idea as to who's going to stop Voldemort, then that's the way it's going to be."

"He's right," Dumbledore agreed.

"What?!" It was Mockridge's turn to shoot out of his chair. "Are you sanctioning this...this...crazy stunt, Dumbledore? I know the boy means well, but isn't it about time we faced up to our responsibilities?! We can't let a young man, almost a child still, fight our battles for us! I've read the reports, you've let him face the dark lord for the years he was attending your school, and it's a miracle Harry's still alive. No, there must be a better way to deal with him than letting a child duel the most feared dark lord in a century!"

"We have no choice." Dumbledore looked up, his eyes shining with regret that came too late. "There's been a prophecy, and with the revelation of current events, it ties in with a newer one that you both should hear."

"A prophecy?" Mockridge asked, and Dumbledore explained to him the one made by Sybil Trelawney. When he was done, Mockridge was pale.

"You mean, Harry's the only one with the power to defeat the dark lord?" He shook his head vehemently. "I refuse to believe that. He's just a boy, and it isn't right that we settle him with this burden just

because of the words of a crazy woman who happens to think she's a seer!"

"There's more. Shortly before...Harry's trial, there was another prophecy made, one that said North's heir shall be taken to his dominion, where his heritage will manifest itself. The long forgotten power will wake, and Ice's armies will flock to him. Traitors will quail before the betrayed, and will be reckoned with. Voldemort's fate will be decided by he who holds the Black Rod."

Before Dumbledore could continue, Harry nailed him with a glare that would have killed any lesser man. "That was why you were so quick to condemn me? Some other lousy prophecy?" Harry laughed bitterly. "Let me guess, you all figured that I'd finally cracked what with a dark idiot after me for years, and because you thought that whoever inherited the seat of Lord Polairix would get rid of Voldemort for you, you figured you didn't need me anymore. Is that about right?"

The mage's silence was more than enough answer for both Harry and Mockridge. "Figures," Harry snorted. "You're just like everyone else. Using me, and when you don't need me anymore, you just dump me to whatever fate is most convenient. I'm sorry I ever believed you meant well."

"Is that true?" Mockridge asked after a moment of uncomfortable silence, his tone icy, and his eyes hard. Dumbledore merely nodded and slumped in his chair.

"Guess you didn't count on the fact that I turned out to be the heir of Polairix. Guess that put a mighty crimp in your plans, didn't it, old man?" Harry chuckled darkly. "Let me tell you right now, I intend to fight and win this war, no matter what you've done to me, but I'm not doing it for you. I'm not even doing it for the wizarding world in general. I'm doing it for myself. Voldemort owes me. He owes me for the lives of my parents, he owes me for Sirius. He owes me for everything he's taken from me and my family, and I'll make him pay, if it's the last thing I do. If you know what's good for you, you'll get your little, insignificant Order and get the hell out of my way, because if

you get between me and Voldemort, then you're going down along with him, is that understood?"

"I don't believe it!" Mockridge shouted angrily when Dumbledore nodded again. "Harry was right, you just threw him away when the chance arose, just because you thought he wasn't your savior anymore – how could you? How could you let a child carry this burden for years, without support, without help, without friends and allies?! How could you just leave him in Azkaban, abandon him without a proper trial? Are you truly so blind, or are you just an idiot, Dumbledore? With people like you and Harry's alleged friends around, it's no wonder the dark lord is winning!" The Minister leaned forward, slamming his fists into his desk right in front of the headmaster. "It wasn't enough that you let a child do an adult's job, it wasn't enough that the entire war effort rests on a young man who's suffered more than any of us, no, you had to go and do more! You used him when it was convenient, and you threw him away when it wasn't, without ever bothering to check on what you actually did to him! I read through the transcripts of that farce of a trial you gave the boy, Dumbledore, and that's all it was – a joke!"

"We had conclusive evidence–"

"Evidence?" Mockridge and Harry echoed, both of them glaring at the old man. "Circumstantial evidence that could be easily explained had you bothered to check, circumstantial evidence that could have easily been refuted by a questioning under Veritaserum, but you didn't even give him a chance to defend himself! Granted, Fudge was always an idiot when it came to Harry Potter, but I would've thought you had more common sense, Dumbledore. I mean, the boy attended your school for five years, for Merlin's sake! You should've known better, you should've known him. Were you that eager to get rid of him the instant you found out about this new prophecy that you thought you could just...just dump him away and be forgotten about? Do you think you're above the law that you can just use him and then abandon him without even a proper trial?"

"At the time–" Dumbledore tried again, only to be cut off as the Minister rounded his desk to roughly pull the old mage to his feet.

Harry seemed to be content to just stand to the side and watch as Mockridge continued his tirade.

"I'll be bringing this before the Wizengamot, Dumbledore, you can be sure about that. Whether you're important to the war or not, I'll have you stripped of your rank and locked away in Azkaban if it turns out that you were so quick to abandon a child to the nonexistent mercy of the Dementors on no evidence at all!"

"Actually," Harry interjected with an amused smirk at the dressing-down his former headmaster was receiving, "he is kind of important. He's the leader of the light, or somesuch nonsense."

Mockridge stared at Dumbledore with newfound disgust. "If he's the leader, then we need a new one." He suddenly remembered one of the memos he'd received. "Sorry about the comment about sending him to Azkaban. Force of habit, I forgot it's not within our jurisdiction anymore."

Harry waved it off. "Don't worry about it. I'd be happy to offer him a room in Chateau Azkaban. On a more important note, while I don't really care whether or not I'm still a wanted man, I'd appreciate it if you could arrange for a re-trial, this time with Veritaserum. I'm afraid it's the only thing I can offer to prove my innocence, since Lucius Malfoy is unfortunately deceased."

"Of course. I'll contact you with the details, but I'll put the arrest warrant for you on hold for the moment until we can sort this mess out. And Dumbledore," Mockridge glared at the man, "I wouldn't go very far if I were you."

"Now, if you're quite done," Harry continued with a smirk, "I'm going to take my leave. I do have a war to plan, after all. I'll be in contact with the details, Bert, but for now kindly put the Aurors on guard and let them know to expect reinforcements. Oh, you might also want to mention that those reinforcements come with their own commanding officers and my express orders. They won't follow any orders given to the by any Auror who thinks he can boss them around."

“Consider it done. I’ll start up the media, and I’ll get word to the public. Considering what kind of dent you made in the dark lord’s image with your counterattack, I’ll imagine it’ll have quite an impact. Are you sure you want to go through with your idea and try to lure Voldemort here?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll let you know once we figure out where we can attack Voldemort, and it may help if we could get a number of Ministry troops to help sweep multiple locations. It’s about time we took this war to Voldemort.”

“I’ll start pulling Aurors from the Ministry then,” Mockridge conceded. “And you’re right, of course. It’s about time we started acting instead of reacting. I just hope for all our sakes that you can defeat him.”

“So do I,” Harry agreed as he turned to leave. “So do I.”

Chapter 36

By: Claihmsolais

Dumbledore slumped into a chair in the living room of Number 12, Grimmauld Place. After Harry had left the Minister's office, it hadn't been long before Mockridge had lost his patience with him and practically thrown the ancient wizard out. Dumbledore suddenly felt every one of his hundred-sixty-plus years as he thought back at how quickly things had changed and how quickly his well-laid plans had been shattered. He ignored the chatter of people around him as the members of the Order arrived to the meeting he had called for the previous day, after rumours of Harry's innocence had once more begun to circulate in the wizarding world, courtesy of Voldemort's foiled attack.

It was only when two people arrived and the rest of the room quieted that Dumbledore looked up to see Severus Snape and Mad-Eye Moody stepping into the room. Every eye was riveted on the two who'd so loudly proclaimed Potter's innocence, and Dumbledore had a feeling that a number of people were bound to be feeling rather vindicated right now. However, there were no snide remarks, no sneers – not beyond usual for Severus, anyway – and no muttered "I told you so's." Instead, the two quietly took their place at the large table and peered at Dumbledore intently.

The ancient wizard cleared his throat and looked around the room at the variety of expressions on the faces of the members of the Order of the Phoenix. There was some fear, mixed with disbelief. Relief shone on some faces, while others showed reservation, some were angry, and some unreadable. But the most prevalent emotion that permeated the room was hope. Hope that now that their savior had returned and begun fighting back, that this bloody war would end soon, and Dumbledore couldn't help but sigh. He had helped take this hope away from the people, but the larger part of his guilt stemmed from the thought that he was the one who'd helped place this hope on the shoulders of an eleven-year old boy years ago, that he'd burdened a child with something a man would be hard-pressed to carry.

Shaking these morose thoughts from his head, Dumbledore stood as the last members of the Order finally trickled in. Silence surrounded him for a few moments before he began to speak.

"I am sure that most of you by now have heard of Voldemort's failed raid on Southhallerton," he began, and murmurs began to fill the room. He clapped his hands loudly, silencing the people. "I am here to tell you now that it is true. Voldemort has indeed been stopped. And it was by Harry Potter."

He had everyone's attention with that statement. Dumbledore cleared his throat again, and continued his announcement. "I have just come from a meeting with him and the Minister of Magic. The Minister has reviewed the evidence used to convict Mr. Potter, and has decided that, due to lack of sufficient evidence, and especially in light of recent events, the warrant for Mr. Potter's arrest is withdrawn. The Minister is convinced now that Mr. Potter is on our side in this war, and so am I."

He wasn't quite prepared for the outburst that followed, but when Molly Weasley's voice rang through the din of the excited chatter that had cropped up, everyone once again fell silent.

"He's messed with the new Minister's mind, hasn't he?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "He has, in fact, not met the Minister before today." The headmaster wisely chose to withhold the fact that Harry and Mockridge had had previous dealings with each other. He would have enough trouble convincing Harry's die-hard enemies of the boy's intentions without having rumours spring up about him manipulating the wizarding world's politics.

"Bollocks!" Ron Weasley shouted from the back of the room. "I bet you Potter's only fighting Voldemort so he can take his place! He's already got an army to follow him – I say we let them kill each other, then wipe out whoever is left!"

"Are you out of your mind, Weasley?" Snape spat as he turned around to glare at Harry's former best friend. "If you had bothered to

pay attention to anything besides your over-inflated ego these last few days, then you would have realized that this war is going badly for us, and that the victory of Potter's forces over the Dark Lord yesterday was the first major victory we've had in months. Even if the boy was turning dark – which he is not – we couldn't win this war without his support at this point."

Molly opened her mouth to shoot an acidic reply towards the potions master, but Dumbledore drew their attention once more. "This is not a time to argue," he told them clearly. "Severus is right. At this point, Harry is the best hope we have for winning this war, and he has made it clear that while we may need him, he doesn't necessarily need us."

"Headmaster!" Molly screeched, scandalized. "You can't possibly think of—"

"Molly," Dumbledore replied softly, "I have realized that I – no, that we all may have been too hasty to condemn young Harry when we found out what happened. The Minister brought up a number of valid points about the evidence, and there is, of course, the fact that we never gave Harry the legally required Veritaserum when questioning him."

"We didn't need the serum," the Weasley matriarch replied haughtily. "He was guilty, everyone could see it. I mean, who wouldn't turn dark with a childhood like his? He's been abandoned, left to live with muggles who despise him, and then there's the fact that every year he's escalated in trying to get my children killed! Of course he's not sane."

"And whose fault is that?" Snape snapped, glaring alternately at Dumbledore and Molly.

"Well, it certainly isn't mine," Molly snapped back. "Why, I should have known after what Ron told me after his first year that that boy wasn't normal!"

"If you'd actually bothered to help the boy out and given him a home-"

"A home? A dragon will have a place in my home before that monster does!" Molly exploded angrily.

Moody replied before Snape could continue the yelling match, the old Auror's voice quiet but firm. "If you knew that he was living with people who despised him so much, why didn't you take him in?" Moody turned to glare at Dumbledore then. "If you'd known, why send him back every year? If you'd known, why not try to give him a normal childhood? Eh?"

Dumbledore could only hang his head in shame, but Molly was adamant. "That wouldn't have changed anything, I tell you! That boy's the next dark lord, and if you trust him then we're all doomed. We're-

"Mother, shut up." Everyone quieted instantly at the softly spoken words that seemed to carry so much more malice than should've been possible. Everyone turned, looking for the source when the most unexpected person stepped forward to stand in front of Molly.

"Shut up," Ginny repeated, leaving everyone in shocked silence. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Tears were running down her face as she yelled with increasing volume. "You are just like the rest of the world, so quick to think the worst of Harry! Because of you-

"Ginevra Weasley!" Molly thundered her face red with anger. "You will apologize right now! I will not be spoken to in that tone, especially not by my own daughter!"

"Shut up!" Ginny roared in return, causing everyone around the two to back away slightly. Snape was the only one in the crowd watching with anything other than horror, a small smirk playing around his lips as he waited for an explosion that he figured had been a long time in coming.

"You filled my head with lies, you filled me with all of these lies and doubts about Harry," Ginny whispered angrily, "you told me he was

evil, you told me he was crazy, that there was no way that he wasn't. You told me that he was a bad person, twisting everything he'd ever done and said. You told us private things about him, about the way he lived with his aunt and uncle, just because you wanted us to believe the worst of him. You made me forget everything he's ever done for us. You made me betray Harry, and I'll never forgive you for that."

"Ginevra Weasley-

"But worst of all," Ginny continued, ignoring her mother, "I will never forgive myself, for believing you over Harry. For believing all the lies you told me when I should have known better. For choosing to betray Harry. He saved my life," she hissed angrily. "He saved my life, and he saved Ron's life. He gave Fred and George the money to realize their dream, and this is how we repay him. All of us here owe him our lives, not once, not twice, but five times over! I hope you're proud of what you've done, mother," she spat, turning on her heel and stalking out of the room.

The people in the room were speechless for a long moment, before murmuring broke out. Molly stared after her daughter, and unreadable look in her eyes. "Why, I've never-"

"Molly, I do believe your daughter was right in this instance," Moody commented. "It'd be best if you remained silent."

Ginny stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind her, but she didn't make it much further than that. Her legs gave out from under her, and she slumped against the wall outside, burying her face in her knees as she sobbed. She had known Harry was innocent from the moment Hermione had returned, and even when Dumbledore said her memory had been tampered with, she had known. Known without a doubt; it was something that transcended just logical understanding; it was a feeling deep in her heart, across a connection that had formed in the Chamber of Secrets. She had known, but now it was real. So real that Dumbledore and the rest of the world were forced to admit it, and the weight of what she'd done had come crashing down on her.

She didn't even think about what the rest of her family had done; the only thing she could see before her inner eye was the last time she'd seen Harry, when she'd told him that Azkaban was a fitting place for him to rot in. She should've known better, she thought despairingly. She should've believed her own instincts before believing what her family had been drilling into them. She had known Harry for years, had been his friend, and yet she'd believed baseless accusations and the rumours spread by her family before she'd believed him. She had turned a blind eye when everyone had pushed through for a hasty trial, going so far as not even giving the boy time to speak to defend himself, and all the while she'd not even felt a scrap of guilt. Because her family had said he was guilty. Because it was so easy to believe them, so easy to believe that he had done it, that he had gone over the edge. So much easier than having to stand up to them, having to stand up to the rest of the wizarding world and do what was right.

She only just now began to understand the kind of pressure Harry had been under while he had been in school. She had seen what the public made him out to be, how fickle they were, proclaiming him their hero one day and their scapegoat the next. And throughout it all, he had managed to always stay his course and do what was right. She had thought him an inspiration for all of his friends, and felt that when it came down to it, she would do the right thing, because that was what he would have done. But when push came to shove, she had failed. All of them had failed, because they'd all taken the easy way out instead of telling the wizarding world to go to hell and doing what was right.

And because of them, because of all of them, Harry had landed in Azkaban. Ginny knew full well what the Dementors did to Harry, and she could only imagine the terror that had gone through him on that island, and he'd gone in the knowledge that everyone, even his most trusted friends, had turned their backs on him and that for the first time since he had arrived at Hogwarts, he was well and truly alone. What was even worse that despite their initial betrayal, Harry had repeatedly tried to reach out to them, tried to talk to them, but they hadn't listened. They had just condemned him, thinking themselves secure in their decision, because it was the easy thing to do. In the end, Harry had been left all to himself. The only good thing Ginny

could see coming out of it was that Harry now was no longer alone – he was the Earl of the North, the heir of the House of Polairix, and from what it seemed like, he was liked, respected, and loved by his people. She was glad for that, because she honestly didn't know whether Harry would have survived being on his own throughout this war, haunted by their recriminations and the wizarding world's baseless accusations. He would have done his duty and destroyed Voldemort, she was sure of that, but once that was done, he would have lacked any further goal in life, lacked any will to live on. He now had that will, that goal, thanks to his inheritance. He was going to live his life, and live it happily, and it wouldn't involve them.

“Oh God, Harry,” she sobbed, burying her face into her hands when she felt two pairs of arms wrap around her shoulders.

“Hey sister dear-“

“We would say-“

“We told you so-“

“But that'd be just-“

“Bad sportsmanship.” Fred finished as the twins settled down next to her. Ginny merely looked up in confusion at the grinning faces of her brothers.

“What’re you talking about?”

“Why, dear sister, we just wanted to let you know that not everyone shares Mom’s point of view in our family,” George smirked at the shocked look on her face, and Fred picked it up.

“Come on, you didn’t really think that Snape and Moody were the only ones who believed in him, were you?”

“Nope, not at all,” George chimed in.

“

Now, what's with the long face?” Fred asked as he leaned over to wipe the tears from Ginny's face, causing the girl to duck her head in embarrassment.

“Fred, George,” she whispered, new tears welling up in her eyes. “Oh Harry, I said – God, I said such horrible things to him.” Her earlier conversation with Hermione came back to her, and she broke down again, sobbing as her brothers held her. George looked over her head at Fred.

“She needs to see him.”

“And talk to him.”

“Preferably soon,” George agreed.

“We should get her in contact with the PL,” Fred added.

“Maybe we can throw in a visit to Nair'i'caix.”

“Wha-?” Ginny barely heard her brothers talking, but the mention of visiting Harry caught her attention.

“Shh.” George shushed her with a gentle smile. “Don't worry about a thing. We'll take care of it. You just make sure you're presentable for Harry.”

“But-“

“No argument, sister dearest,” Fred added. “You need to talk to him.”

Ginny nodded and they fell silent for a moment, before she glanced back up. “Will he even want to see me? After all we did to him? After all that I did? The last time I saw him I told him off something awful,

and I – I let Mom and Dad talk me into believing all of this nonsense they've been saying about him. I believed he was evil!" she cried.

Fred and George shared a worried look. They knew their sister was taking it hard; Ginny was the most idealistic of them, and, apart from Ron, had known Harry the best. She also owed him her life, and the guilt of ignoring all of that in favor of listening to the public's opinion was crushing her now. Both of them had been angry at Ginny for siding with their mother against Harry, but they'd realized that Ginny was also the youngest and most impressionable, and Molly Weasley could be really persuasive when she was being belligerent.

"Now, Ginny, don't you worry," Fred began calmly.

"Right, you know how Harry is," George continued.

"He'll probably just wave it all off."

"And forgive you." Although there are some he really shouldn't, George added silently, though he couldn't really bring himself to add his sister to that list. His youngest brother, on the other hand, was a different matter.

"It'll be all right, you'll see. You know how big Harry's heart is."

Ginny managed a weak smile at that. "I do, and that's what worries me. If I were him I wouldn't be forgiving any of us, much less even look at us anymore. He doesn't need us any longer, Professor Dumbledore said as much. Harry finally found people who trust him, look up to him...he doesn't need our support to fight V-v-voldemort anymore. Why bother with me, when all I've done is caused him pain?"

George sighed, and looked at his sister seriously. "Because, Ginny, that's not what Harry's like. We all know that he's too nice for his own good. Lord knows some people don't deserve it—" he mentally smacked himself as he watched her flinch at his words, and continued quickly, "but you do. Ginny, you didn't know any better.

You trusted what Mom and Dad and everyone else told you about Harry.”

“But I shouldn’t have! I know Harry, I’ve known him for years, lived in the same dorm—“

“That’s right, you know Harry,” George continued. “Do you seriously doubt he wouldn’t forgive you?”

Ginny shook her head. “No, he will. I know he will, that’s how he is,” she choked back a sob. “And then he’ll bottle up all of his bitterness inside and shut everyone out because he doesn’t want us to see how much it’s hurting him inside. He doesn’t deserve this, how can I make him hurt any more after what I’ve already done?”

“Because you need it, Ginny. Both of you,” Fred joined in, both of the twins uncharacteristically serious. “Lord knows, the kid is too good for this world, but that’s the way he is. He needs closure, Ginny. From what we know, he’s already begun to find it with Hermione, and if he can forgive her and work through things with her after what she did, then the two of you can, too.”

“He has?” Ginny’s eyes widened in surprise, and George nodded in confirmation.

“She’s the one who provided the information for Harry to stop the raid yesterday. She’s with him right now. Last Neville said, they’re at least back on speaking terms, and it only took them a day and a half. Well, from what I hear, she had to really push to let him help, but she wouldn’t take a no for an answer.”

George nodded. “True, that. I think that was her guilt making her want to do something to make it up to him. I wouldn’t be taking a no for an answer in her place, either, but that’s Harry for you. Fighting you tooth and nail and insisting he can do everything by himself.”

Ginny shrank back into herself as she let out a half-laugh, half-sob. “We really don’t deserve him, do we?”

“Not really, no,” Fred mused.

“But we’re glad he’s here nonetheless,” George added.

“And hey, he can always claim that he’s God’s gift to women!”

That managed to draw a weak smile from Ginny. “That wasn’t really funny,” she told the twins weakly.

“Well, blame it on the mood.” Fred shrugged. “Now, on a more important note, we need to get you to meet some people, and we need to set up a meeting with his majesty Lord Polairix.”

“You – you’ve really been in touch with Harry?” Ginny asked in awe.

“Yep. You should’ve seen us-“

“Real cloak and dagger stuff-“

“Like that muggle Dad’s so obsessed with, what’s his name?”

“James Blond?”

“Something like that.”

“Anyway-“

“ We’re certified Harry Potter flunkies,” George whispered conspiratorially, winking at her briefly. At her disbelieving stare, both twins theatrically placed their hands over their hearts.

“We tell the truth-“

“And nothing but the truth-“

“Cross your heart-“

“And hope to die.”

“And now, dear sister, I think it’s time you met some friends of Harry’s,” Fred noted as he stood, pulling her to her feet.

“Where are we going?”

“Why, dear sister, we’re going to meet—“

“Potter’s Legion,” George finished with a grin.

Ginny’s eyes widened in surprise when she heard the name. She stood between her brothers, a new determination spreading through her. Hermione seemed to have found her place at Harry’s side once more, helping him in his quest to destroy Voldemort. Ginny didn’t know if it was Hermione’s conscience making her help, or whether she considered it some sort of penance, but the youngest Weasley suddenly realized what she had to do. She straightened, furiously wiping away at the tear-tracks on her face. There was nothing she could do to change the past – what she had done to Harry was already done, and nothing she did would change it.

She couldn’t change it, but she could make up for it. Until now, all she had done was spend her energy on condemning Harry and feeling sorry for herself, it was time she turned it on something useful. She remembered telling Hermione that if she found out Harry was innocent, she had vowed to crawl to him and beg him to kill her. She amended that vow silently. She knew that she felt bad enough that she wanted to die, she wanted Harry to be able to punish her as she deserved, but that would be taking the easy way out. It would be too easy on her; she wouldn’t have to live with the consequences of her actions, wouldn’t have to live with having to make up for them.

And she knew that Harry would never willingly hurt her. No, she would face him, head held high, and offer him her life as penance. No, she would tell him, in no uncertain terms, that she was helping, and that there wasn’t anything he could do about it. She would do whatever she could to help him bring an end to this war, and she would do everything in her power to fix the wrongs she’d done to him. It wouldn’t be easy, and it’d be a long and painful time before she

would have managed to complete her task, but she would do it. She owed him this much, at least.

No longer would she be taking the easy way out.

Chapter 37

By: Claihmsolais

When Harry arrived back at the fortress, he was surprised to see Hermione chatting with Bella as if the two were the best of friends. Both of them were smiling, though his wife seemed to be positively beaming as they welcomed him home.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked in confusion as the two women led him to the reception room.

“We have guests,” Bella told him cryptically.

“Queen Xerina?”

“No, no, this doesn’t have anything to do with the war council we’re holding later today. This is something more personal.” Bella grinned as she pushed open the large double doors with a flourish.

Harry’s jaw dropped as he caught sight of Hermione’s parents, flanked on one side by a full complement of Ice soldiers and by a number of Hogwarts students from Potter’s Legion on the other. “What’re they doing here?” he stammered in confusion, even as Hermione rushed forward to meet her parents. Bella dragged Harry along at a more leisurely pace as she explained.

“Well, I kind of figured it’d be best if she owled them and let them know she was fine. She was kidnapped by Voldemort, you know. They were pretty worried, you know.” Bella’s eyes glittered dangerously. “It appears that our dear Professor Dumbledore failed to inform them that Hermione had gone missing. Naturally, when they heard the full story from the letter she sent them, they were very insistent on coming to see her.”

“Oh.” Harry blinked as he digested his wife’s explanation. It made sense, he thought, when something she’d said caught his attention.

"Wait. You said Dumbledore hasn't told them she was kidnapped? Or that Voldemort placed a memory charm on her?"

Bella shook her head. "He didn't, that's what makes me mad. These are children's lives he's playing with, and then he doesn't even have the regard for them to let their parents know when they're in danger."

"If I'd known before, I wouldn't have let Bert have all the fun," Harry growled.

"Oh?" Bella arched an elegant eyebrow. "I take it that things went pretty well, then?"

Harry nodded. "The highlight was probably when Bert started tearing pieces out of the old man when he found out Dumbledore had stuck me in prison on virtually no evidence. That reminds me, I need to bring something up at the meeting. Turns out there's something else Dumbledore hasn't told me."

"What else is new?" Bella snorted in disdain.

"Only that it involves me, a prophecy, some kind of magic weapon against Voldemort, and the reason Dumbledore was so quick to leave me to rot in a cell in Azkaban."

"Oh." It was Bella's turn to frown. "Well, Queen Xerina should be arriving in a few minutes. Count Trazkaban and Neville are already here. Snape, Lupin, and Moody aren't."

"They're most likely at the Order meeting Dumbledore no doubt called for the instant he figured out he'd screwed up big time," Harry finished with a chuckle. "We'll fill them in later."

"Harry! Oh Harry, thank you so much for letting them come!" Hermione had dragged her parents over to where the two had been standing on the sidelines, causing the young Lord to raise an eyebrow.

"But – I didn't do anything?"

Bella elbowed him in the ribs, causing him to wince, and hissed into his ear. "You're letting them into the castle, that's something."

"But I didn't even know about this until—"

"Just go with it already, Potter!" Bella refrained from stepping on her husband's foot when understanding dawned in his eyes, and he shook his head with a grin.

"You're devious, Bella. Absolutely devious."

"Of course," she replied with a smirk. "Someone's got to be the brains of this family, after all." She glanced over as Harry shook the Grangers' hands. Maybe this'll help them all along. I can tell her parents had no idea what's going on in the wizarding world, and from what it looks like, he just made some instant allies, she concluded with a satisfied smirk as she watched Mr. Granger give Harry a hearty pat on the back while Hermione's mother hugged him tightly.

"Thank you, thank you so much for keeping our daughter safe," Bella caught as she took a few steps closer, and carefully hid a smile. If Hermione was aware that this was a set up, she showed no signs of it as she moved to stand next to the former Death Eater.

"Thanks," the brunette murmured quietly. "For letting them know."

"Don't thank me, thank Harry."

"Thank you both." Hermione glanced up at her. "Without you, I doubt Harry would've been willing to let me stay. I can't tell you how much I owe you for speaking out for me, for convincing him to let me stay. I can't accept his forgiveness until I can forgive myself, and that's going to be a long time from now...but at least I know that I'm doing something now to mend the bridges."

Bella shrugged. "He needs you," she explained slowly, as if choosing her words carefully. "You're the first family he's ever had, and while

he doesn't want to admit it, he at least needs some closure to find his peace."

The two women remained silent for a while, watching as Harry talked to Hermione's parents briefly, before turning back to them, with a sly grin on his face. "Can you imagine, they almost called the police. I can just see them stopping Dumbledore and taking him in for questioning."

Bella blinked, not quite understanding, while Hermione giggled. "He's got an insanity defense down, if I ever saw one," she managed, while Harry elaborated for his wife's benefit.

"The police are the muggle equivalent of Auror's." His voice deepened as he mimicked an officer. "All points, be advised to be on the lookout for a suspected kidnapper. The suspect is tall, aged one-hundred fifty to one-hundred sixty, long white hair and floor-length beard. All points, be advised the suspect is armed with a foot-long stick of wood and extremely barmy. He may resist arrest by attempting to turn you all into squirrels."

The women giggled, while Mr. Granger smirked at Harry. "I take it you don't really care much for Professor Dumbledore, then?" he asked.

Harry shook his head. "Not after all he's done. The man's a manipulative old bastard. If you knew some of the things he did—"

"Like supporting the decision to convict you?"

"How'd you know?" Harry blinked in surprise.

"Hermione explained a good deal of the situation to us when she wrote. She had to." The older man growled. "If I could get my hands on the man...and that incompetent twit of a Minister..." He broke off as his wife laid a calming hand on his arm.

"I have good news for you, then," Harry grinned. "Minister Fudge has officially been voted out of office. Last I heard, he took the few people loyal to him, and ran with his tail tucked between his legs. I

daresay the new Minister is a bit more responsible," he told Hermione's parents with a mischievous smile.

Mr. Granger chuckled. "Why do I get the feeling you had your hand in that?"

"Who, me?" Harry clasped his hands behind his back and smiled back innocently. "I do believe such an action would be considered illegal in certain circles. Manipulation of elections, and somesuch nonsense."

"And you'd never do anything illegal, of course."

"Of course. Then again, illegal depends on your point of view," Harry replied cheekily.

"Excuse me, milord," Tess's voice interrupted them, and Harry glanced up to see her flanked by Neville and Count Trazkaban.

"What is it?"

"Her majesty Queen Xerina has arrived, and is awaiting you in the conference room," the young woman told him. "I was about to take you to them."

Harry nodded and excused himself from the Grangers. "That's all right, I can find my way. Would you please show the Grangers to the guest room?"

"Of course," Tess nodded, and the two exchanged parties as Harry led his allies out of the room. He'd barely stepped outside the door when he heard Hermione call out to him.

"Wait up!" The brunette girl ran to catch up with them. "I'm coming, too. You might need an extra pair of eyes."

Harry eyed her critically for a moment, before nodded. "All right. We could use your help. Are your parents all right with that?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I told them I was going to help you."

When they reached the conference room – which was really just one of the dining rooms of the castle remodeled into something more suitable for a council of war – Queen Xerina was already waiting for them, flanked by a tall, thinly-built ice man wearing elaborate silver armor. The shoulder-guards were trimmed in gold, and a crest that Harry didn't recognize was etched into one, while a number and a Phoenix were etched into the other. The Queen stood when Harry entered the room, bowing to him, prompting the heir of the North to return the gesture.

"Queen Xerina," Harry began, "it's good to see you again."

"The pleasure is mine," the Queen replied as they all sat down. "Allow me to introduce General Rotan. He is the commander I have chosen for the seven combat regiments that will begin arriving tomorrow. I have the utmost faith in his loyalty and skills. You will find him an able leader on the battlefield, I think."

"Milord." The General snapped off a quick salute towards Harry.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," Harry nodded towards Xerina and her officer. "Please, no formalities are necessary in this room. While I do realize we need to keep up appearances outside, in here we have a war to plan, and we're all equals fighting on the same side. Now, could you give me a quick overview of where we are in terms of troop deployment?"

Rotan answered for Xerina as the ice general leaned forward to unroll a piece of parchment. "Currently, we have managed to muster seven combat-ready regiments, for a total of three thousand five hundred troops, including assault squads, magic support units, and healers. They have begun packing up their equipment from our garrisons and are beginning to move here, after we have finished moving the support and logistics personnel." He glanced at Harry as he handed him the parchment. "Listed there are the combat troops and support personnel. We assumed that Nair'i'caix does not have the

infrastructure or personnel in place to sustain such a large force, even for just a few days until they are moved out.”

Harry glanced over the paper and nodded. “That was a good idea. I apologize that I had to call upon you on such short notice, but we need to act fast, before Voldemort has a chance to strike first. The sooner the war is over, the less collateral damage there will be.”

“Of course,” Rotan leaned back. “I was informed by my Queen that you had a preliminary strategy in mind?”

“Yes. Count, if you would?” Harry looked to his side, and Hiscophney conjured up a map of Great Britain, highlighting the locations of wizarding villages.

“These are the targets,” Hiscophney explained. “We suspect Voldemort is going to hit one of the least guarded villages within the next few days in retaliation. We’re guessing he will be going after a civilian target of no strategic importance to ensure minimal resistance and maximize potential casualties. That excludes major targets in wizarding London, Yorkshire, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Oxford, Cardiff, Liverpool, and Bristol.” The corresponding locations faded to a dull grey, leaving about a dozen other locations highlighted in vivid red.

Rotan nodded in agreement. “It would fit his profile. He wants revenge, and to instill fear once again, but without suffering too many losses. Do you want us to deploy troops to these locations and intercept him?”

“No.” Harry shook his head. “We will be taking the first strike from him, and then force him into taking action towards a target of our choice. If we can lure him into a trap, then we can finish him. The Ministry estimates that at this time, Voldemort has a force of several hundred Death Eaters, a few dozen giants and trolls, and an undisclosed number of Vampires and Werewolves at his disposal. That is why I asked for your assistance, General.” Harry smiled grimly. “We force him into an open, all-out attack, and take him out on a battlefield of our choosing.”

Rotan frowned, and the disapproving expressions on the other faces in the room didn't escape the aged general, either. "I don't like this plan, milord. Voldemort's forces are strong, and we could potentially match them in combat, but what about Voldemort himself? Would it not be best to isolate him from his troops and destroy him individually?"

"You can't." Harry looked around the table. "No offense to you or your soldiers, but none of you can defeat Voldemort."

"Then who will? I find it absurd to believe that just because he's a powerful wizard, he can't be defeated. He's just human – throw enough at him, and he will fall," Hiscophney disagreed.

"I think it's about time you heard something that Professor Dumbledore deemed important enough to keep from me for the last few years," Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, and recounted Sybil Trelawney's prophecy for the second time that day.

When he was done, Bella was holding his hand in hers. Neville had already known, while Hiscophney, Xerina, and Rotan all stared incredulously. It was Xerina who spoke up after a long moment of silence.

" You can't seriously believe in that! You can't hope to face Voldemort alone and come out victorious – and just because some third-rate seer thinks she had a vision doesn't mean that you're the only one capable of stopping him. This is nonsense!"

"There's more," Harry added quietly.

"More?"

"According to Dumbledore, shortly before I was thrown into Azkaban, there was a second prophecy made. One that states that North's heir shall be taken to his dominion, where his heritage will manifest itself. The long forgotten power will wake, and Ice's armies will flock to him. Traitors will quail before the betrayed, and will be reckoned with.

Voldemort's fate will be decided by he who holds the Black Rod. I have a good idea of what that means, at least."

The shock in Neville's and Bella's eyes was obvious as they connected the dots. Hiscophney and Xerina took a while longer. "So, he threw you away when he thought that you were no longer useful, eh?" Rotan growled angrily.

"Wizards," Hiscophney sneered as he shook his head in disgust. "That one seems clear to me. In connection with the first one, maybe the power you have that Voldemort knows now is your heritage of Polairix. If that were the case, then that would not necessarily mean that you will be the one to destroy him, merely that you are instrumental in his destruction. If your heritage truly is the power spoken of in the prophecy, then it might very well be that you destroy Voldemort simply by bringing the full might of our forces to bear on him."

"There's something else," Xerina chimed in, exchanging a meaningful look with Hiscophney. "The Black Rod mentioned, I think it may hold the key to defeating Voldemort. Killing his physical body most likely would not be the end of him – after all, he has already survived the killing curse once, though as a spirit only. If we were to charge in and destroy his mortal form without further knowledge of what measures he has taken to guard his spirit from passing on, we may well just be delaying him."

Hiscophney frowned. "Don't tell me you believe in the legends? They're folktales, no one has seen the Rod of Dominion for a millennia and a half, and even then, stories about it are sketchy at best."

"No one has seen an heir of Polairix in centuries, either," Xerina shot back, "yet here we are, united by the heir of the North."

"The seat of government and a mythical item of indescribable power are two completely different things!"

"The Rod exists!"

“Prove it!”

Harry blinked in confusion as the two rulers stared each other down, before realizing that he had to defuse the situation. He leaned forward in between the two, and cleared his throat, but they ignored him in favor of their staring contest. Across the table, Neville caught Harry’s eye and mimicked placing two fingers in his mouth. Getting the hint, Harry took a deep breath and let out an ear-piercing whistle that startled everyone at the table, even the ones that had been expecting it. Hiscophney and Xerina practically jumped out of their chairs, then looked down in embarrassment at having been caught up in their bickering. Harry could see Rotan smirking appreciatively from the corner of his eye as the aging general placed a calming hand on his queen’s arm.

“I believe Lord Polairix wishes to speak, milady,” he told her with barely disguised mirth.

“Yes, um,” Harry glanced at his two allies who seemed to have such a different opinion about something he had no idea of, “would you mind explaining the whole thing? This whole Rod of Dominion story and what it’s got to do with Voldemort?”

Xerina and Hiscophney shared a glance before the Count shrugged and gestured for her to take the lead. “Legends tell that sometime during the reign of the House of Polairix, before this fortress was built, the seat of the North was on a different island, the location of which has been long lost. About fifteen hundred years ago, the reigning Lord Polairix was involved in a number of wars with neighboring kingdoms, as they aided the Ice folk against a number of dark creatures that had sought to invade our lands. Our historians only have sketchy records of that time, at best, mainly because the invasion succeeded, and vampires, ghouls, and evil spirits drove us out of our home.”

“So what happened?” Neville asked before Harry could.

“Lord Polairix brought his armies to our aid, and they drove the dark armies away,” Xerina told them. “But they did not stop there, taking the fight to their own areas, laying siege to their forts. It was then that it was discovered that a dark wizard was behind the army of darkness that had swarmed across the lands. It is rumoured that this same dark wizard gave Alaric the First the might he needed to invade and plunder Rome. When Lord Polairix and his army destroyed him, they thought that had been the end of the war, and it was. We had peace for another two hundred years. And then he returned.”

“Returned?” Harry questioned, a note of alarm creeping into his tone. This was starting to sound much too familiar for his taste.

The queen of the Ice people nodded. “It started with small things, random deaths here and there, unsolved murders, and uprisings of dark creatures. And then we found ourselves besieged by a dark army once more. When our soldiers returned from the battlefield, most were shaken deeply, telling stories of the undead walking amongst the living, and the unnaturalness that surrounded the area. The few that had survived their encounter with the enemy general claimed that the dark wizard from two hundred years hence had returned, only that this time he claimed to be immortal, stripped of the weakness of his flesh, and reeking of the stench of death. Deep wounds seemed to trouble him none, and even when our most powerful magic destroyed his corporeal body, he would simply move to another body and inhabit it.”

Harry frowned and shared a concerned look with his wife. Bella shrugged and shook her head. “I’ve never heard of Voldemort being able to shrug off injuries that easily.”

“He can’t,” Hiscophney interjected. “At least, not yet. During our battle, I managed to hit him with a few spells, and so did Harry. He definitely felt them, though they were not enough to take him down.”

“It’s the ‘yet’ that worries me, though,” Harry admitted. “We all know Voldemort is looking for immortality, and this guy from the Ice people’s legends sounds rather like what he’s after.”

“That is why I suggested that the Rod of Dominion may hold the key to destroying Voldemort.” Xerina frowned at the dubious look Hiscophney was sending her. “The heir of Polairix at the time was a talented mage and artificer – he was an excellent duelist, but according to legend, he had absolutely no grasp on tactics. He left the fighting decisions to his generals, but insisted that only he face the dark wizard in combat. After weeks of constant fighting, he had crafted a unique artifact that would allow him to completely sever the magic that contains a soul. No one knows how it was done, but when he arrived on the battlefield with the Rod of Dominion, he was able to destroy the dark wizard and his soul so completely that nothing remained. Deeming the Rod too dangerous to fall into the wrong hands, it was secluded away, as no one, not even its creator, could find a way to destroy it.”

“So, it’s still out there?” Understanding dawned on Harry. He had been worried about how to defeat Voldemort, especially if his spirit was immortal, but if there existed a weapon that could destroy him in spirit form, then suddenly, he stood a chance again.

“According to some,” Hiscophney grumbled. The sorcerer looked highly skeptical. “Milord, we cannot afford to waste time by going off on a treasure hunt. Voldemort will eventually make his move, and we have to prepare our armies to meet him.”

“I disagree-“ Xerina began, only to be cut off by her general’s hand on her shoulder.

Rotan shook his head as he explained. “My queen, while it is true that the Rod of Dominion may be the key to destroying Voldemort, its location is unknown, and so are its defenses. It isn’t even known if it still exists, and placing all of our hopes on something so vague is not a good idea.”

“But we can’t outright dismiss it, either,” Hermione spoke up for the first time since the meeting had started. “If we did, and it later turned out that it was real and could have turned the tide, we’ll be in big trouble. Or even worse, if Voldemort finds out about it and gets his hands on it-“

“That’d be just...bad,” Neville finished. “You’re right.”

The seven people in the room lapsed into silence as they tried to come up with a working plan. Finally, it was Bella who made the decision. “Okay, how about this – Harry, you, Hiscophney, and General Rotan take care of the troops. Harry knows Voldemort best, and Hiscophney and Rotan need to be there to command their troops. Xerina and I will work on researching the Rod’s location and existence.”

“I can help, too,” Hermione added, and Bella nodded at her.

Neville raised a hand. “I can have a few people from Potter’s Legion go through the Hogwarts library and see if they can find anything. It’s unlikely, but who knows, maybe we can find something.”

“That’s a good idea, actually,” Bella agreed.

“Is there anything else you want us to do?”

Harry picked that point to join his wife. “No, Neville. This is going to be all-out war pretty soon, and as good as you and the others are, you’re just students, and I’m not going to willingly place you in harm’s way. Tell the others to lay low, help out where they can, but warn them not to take unnecessary risks. I’ll have to arrange emergency portkeys for all of you so you can come here in case of an emergency.”

“What about the Order?”

“The Order is not important. I’ve got the go-ahead from the Minister of Magic, and the Aurors are going to be on our side in this. I don’t think Dumbledore is going to get in our way, especially since he finally got it into his skull that we’re on the same side in this,” Harry grumbled at the mention of the headmaster. “As for Snape, Moony, and Tonks, could you please inform Snape about what we discussed here, and have him replay it to the others?”

Neville nodded enthusiastically. "Consider it done."

Harry was doing his best to be silent as he entered the bedroom he shared with his wife, but he needn't have bothered. The instant Bella saw his form silhouetted against the light outside, she called for light, causing them both to blink away the sudden brightness. Harry looked weary, Bella thought, though a full day of planning and discussing battle tactics would probably do that. She also noticed something else – there was now a confident square in his shoulders that she hadn't really realized was missing, though she really should have. After all, despite all his power and skill, despite his riches and his heritage, Harry was just...Harry. He wasn't a trained wizard, nor a trained duelist, but merely a teenager, who had, through some fluke of fate, ended up with the job of killing the most powerful dark wizard in centuries, or be killed.

Wow, if I put it that way, it really does sound hopeless, she thought with a wry grin as she waved off Harry's apologies for waking her, patting the spot next to her on the bed. She hadn't really thought about it much, but the thought simply occurred to her – how did Harry feel about the burden on his shoulders? How did someone who hadn't even finished his schooling deal with something like this? She had seen the hope that had sparked in his eyes when Xerina had informed them that the Rod would very likely be able to kill Voldemort, and realized that his duel with the dark wizard had shaken him more than he'd let on.

Harry slid into bed next to her, and she slipped her arms around his waist immediately, pulling him close and relishing his warmth. He waved his hand and the light turned off, but they didn't go to sleep. She could feel the tension slowly drain from him, but as always, a part of it lingered. She had a good feeling that he needed to talk about it, and this was as good a time as any to start.

"You're bothered by something," she said, and it wasn't a question.

"I am?"

"Yes, you are." Bella nodded into the crook of her husband's neck.

“I think I’d know if I were,” Harry chuckled, though to her, it sounded only half-hearted.

“No, actually, I don’t think you would.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Harry turned around in her embrace so they were face to face. “Are you calling me dense?” he asked with a smirk.

“Maybe just a bit slow on the uptake,” Bella replied cheekily, with a matching grin. Her mirthful expression vanished quickly, however, to be replaced by a serious one. “Honestly, you have this thing about just pushing everything away. You’ve said ‘I’m fine’ so often even when you weren’t that you’re starting to believe it, yourself. It can’t work forever, Harry,” she whispered.

“I’m-“

“You’re not fine. Maybe you believe that you are, for now, but you’re not. You’re just pushing everything that’s bothering you out of your mind, and eventually, it’s going to come back with a vengeance, and it’s going to be ugly.”

Harry smiled wryly. “Can’t be any worse than it’d be if I let it all out right now.”

“Oh, but you’re wrong. It’ll be much, much worse.” Bella didn’t notice as a tear slid down her cheek. “Take it from someone with too many regrets. I spent years in Voldemort’s service, pushing the things out of my mind that bothered me, and where did that leave me when I was left in Azkaban with nothing but time to think about them? Nearly insane.”

“I thought that was the Dementors?”

She shook her head. “They were only part of it. They made me relive the memories, but I was the one who kept thinking about them.

Eventually, the wall I'd stuffed all of my baggage behind got pried open, and look where it got me."

"You turned out fine," Harry protested, only to be silenced when Bella placed a finger on his lips, a haunted look in her eyes.

"I'm not," she whispered quietly. "I probably won't ever be. I've got so much guilt to deal with I don't even know where to start. I did horrible things while I served the dark lord, and I can't ever make up for them – and I'll live with that for the rest of my life."

Harry gently removed her hand from his lips and kissed her knuckles. "You'll be fine," he told her, "Neville even forgave you, and you're already making up for what you did back then. Sometimes, it's the thought that counts. Before you can accept anyone else's forgiveness, you'll have to forgive yourself, first. And I'll be there for you, I'll make sure you do, because I love you, Bella. I need you. Our child needs you." Harry placed a hand on her stomach and smiled at her, his eyes lighting up in joy as if the situation had only just now fully settled in his mind.

"I'll be there, I promise." Bella swallowed hard. She had been meaning to be the one to make Harry talk, but somehow, the topic had changed to her. She grasped his hand and joined them on her stomach as she allowed herself a smile, as well. She was going to be a mother. A few years ago – even just a few months ago she wouldn't ever have dreamed of becoming a mother, much less being able to be one, with the situation she was in. But now...she had a husband who loved her, a child to care for, and people whose forgiveness she so desperately wanted to accept, but couldn't until she'd completed her repentance. "The potion is almost ready, you know," she told him.

"It is?"

Bella nodded. "I talked to Neville after we left you three in the room to discuss matters. He'll be coming over for the procedure, and we both agreed it'd be best if the first thing his parents see is their son instead of someone they hate." She couldn't really hold back the strangled sob that escaped her throat as she thought about the Longbottoms.

Never really had she been bothered by other people's hatred for her. She used to relish it, in fact, feeding off their hate and fear of her, but that now seemed like a lifetime away.

"I'm sure they'll forgive you," Harry encouraged her. "Neville did, after all."

They drifted into silence for a while, both of them lost in thought, when Bella asked something that utterly surprised Harry. "How do you feel about this? About having a child? It must be hard on you, you're almost one, yourself."

He didn't quite know how to answer that, and the fearful tone in her voice told him he would have to pick his answer very carefully, but fortunately, she seemed content to give him time to choose his words properly. "I'm happy," he finally said. "You're right, I'm still kind of young, and I really didn't expect for this to happen until a few years from now, but it doesn't really matter. Whether we get started with our family now or five years from now, I'll love you and our child just as much. It'll be pretty awkward to have someone call me 'dad' who's only sixteen years younger than me, but hey, we're wizards. We live so long, a few years here or there don't really make much of a dent in anything."

He almost feared he'd given her the wrong impression when Bella threw her arms around his neck and gave him a long, loving, passionate kiss. When they pulled apart for air, he smirked. "I guess I should answer your questions about parenthood more often, if this is the reply I can expect."

"Oh you," Bella swatted his arm playfully, tears glistening in her eyes. "Thank you, for everything."

"No, Bella...thank you. You've made my life complete. You've given me happiness, and you've guided me. But from now on, you're not leaving the fortress."

She was about to open her mouth and argue with him when a thought occurred to her and she snapped her jaw shut. "I understand," she

said. And she did. While she hated standing on the sidelines and waiting in safety while Harry went into danger, she knew that if Voldemort ever got his hands on her again, she was dead. Most likely, many of her former comrades would love nothing better than to kill her and take her head on a pike to give to Voldemort as a gift. As unlikely as that was to happen, considering her skills, she was now responsible not only for her own safety, but also that of her child, and just thinking of what Death Eaters would do to her unborn son or daughter made her shudder.

"I was somehow expecting you to put up more of a fight," Harry chuckled.

"I was about to," she admitted. "But I know the dark lord, and what he's capable of. If he ever manages to get a hold of me, then..."

"It won't happen," Harry promised her, "I'm not going to let him touch you, or our child."

Bella nodded in gratitude. Knowing what Voldemort was capable of, and his considerable resources, laying a trap for her to lure out Harry was a very valid concern, and she wasn't about to risk her husband or her child just because she felt useless. And that wasn't even the case – she would be helping Hermione with her research on the Rod of Dominion, she was actually helping, which made the frustration a little easier to deal with.

She wrapped her arms around Harry, pulling him close. "I just don't want to lose you."

"You won't. Especially not now, not since we have a chance of taking out Voldemort for good." Harry pressed a kiss into her hair. "You were right, you know," he told her after a minute.

"About?"

"Something bothering me. I just realized it. I was afraid. Afraid that I couldn't defeat Voldemort." Harry sighed and began stroking Bella's hair, more to calm himself down. "When I fought him, everything

started out fine. I was holding my ground after you teaching and training me in dueling, and we even managed to get in a few small shots here and there. But when he got mad..."

Bella could feel him shudder, and she knew why. While she had never seen Voldemort duel at full strength – mainly because Dumbledore was the only one with the power and experience to force Voldemort to that level – she knew that he had earned his reputation as the most powerful dark wizard in centuries. Simply the fact that Harry had survived so many encounters with him and lived to tell the tale spoke volume of his courage and strength. "It's all right, Harry. It's all right to feel scared."

"He was so...so good. Too good. Too fast, too strong...I couldn't do anything except duck and hide. I couldn't put up shields, I couldn't get in a counter-attack." Harry sighed. "How was I going to defeat that? I've been asking myself that ever since I got back from fighting him. Now, I'm hoping that with this Rod, we actually have a chance of ending this for good. If only I can figure out a way to get in one good shot at him, this'll all be over."

She could see where this was going, and she didn't really like it. Sometimes, Harry had a tendency to be self-sacrificing to the extreme, and she had a feeling that it was rearing its ugly head right now. "Don't even start," she told him quietly. "Don't even start thinking about doing something reckless just to get an opening. I can't lose you...you have to promise me, promise me that you'll always come back home," she pleaded.

Harry's deep chuckle did little to reassure her as he replied. "I will. I promise. I won't try something stupid unless it's a very last resort, and even then, I'll think twice about it." He could hear Bella let out a relieved sigh, and continued. "Do you know why?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Because of you. I've got someone to come back to. I won't ever leave you two, whatever happens. I swear it on my magic."

The two fell asleep soon after, content in the knowledge that the other was going to be there for them, and neither noticed as Harry's sleeping form began to glow, his magic drifting around him in soft tendrils that reached for Bella and intertwined with hers.

Voldemort was furious. He had spent the day consolidating his forces and planning a major attack to calm the Death Eaters that had begun to question his ability. Of course, most of them had ended up writhing in pain on the ground before him, but even their screams did nothing to ease his mind. Then, to make matters worse, he had gotten reports that much of the funding from his senior Death Eaters had been cut off, with Gringotts revoking their access and handing over control of a number of vaults to the Ministry.

And as if that wasn't enough, he'd had to deal with the former Minister's ugly face and whining all day long. Voldemort shook his head in disgust. How Fudge had ever been elected was something that eluded him. He had in fact planned to assassinate the Minister as the first step to his takeover, but when he realized how incompetent Fudge really was, he'd left him be. But now that Fudge had joined him, all Voldemort ever heard from the man's mouth was "I". It was as if he thought the world revolved around him, and it was enough to make him want to torture Fudge into insanity, put him under the Imperius curse, and order him to break his own bones one by one. Unfortunately, since a good number of the people Fudge had brought with him had information on government activities, he needed them, so Fudge was to be left alive...for now.

"Milord!" Rookwood's voice came from the door, snapping the dark lord's attention back to the present.

Putting on a glare that would suitably scare whoever had dared to intrude on him, he raised his wand and hissed at his Death Eater. "What do you want? Answer me, before you find out just how much I've been displeased today!"

Rookwood slowed down as he approached Voldemort, dropping to one knee when he was a few yards away. "We have a gift for you. Bring her in," he called over his shoulder, and Voldemort's eyes widened in surprise as two other Death Eaters dragged in a woman

that was struggling to kick them off, but they held on firm, knowing that if they let her go, they probably would be dead and in pain faster than they could say “Crucio.”

“We found her at one of the properties that was seized by the government. We assume she was looking for something, but she wouldn’t reply,” Rookwood explained as he stood and backed away. The two other Death Eaters pushed the woman forward, where she landed on her hands and knees in front of Voldemort.

“Well done,” he announced as an idea began to form in his mind. Maybe something useful would come out of this day, after all. “You may leave me now.”

The three Death Eaters bowed and left the room, leaving Voldemort to stare at the woman at his feet who was glaring back at him hatefully. Finally, a smirk spread over his snake-like visage, and he raised his wand, causing her to back away in fear.

“Don’t worry, this isn’t going to hurt...Incompertus Decretum!”

Chapter 37

By: Claihmsolais

Ginny was rather apprehensive as Fred and George picked her up from the Burrow; the three of them Flooed to the twin's shop in Diagon Alley, and made their way over to Florean Fortescue's ice cream parlor. Ginny wasn't quite sure what to make of it as her brothers hadn't said a word since picking her up. She had tried to ask, but they had both been tight-lipped. When they arrived, the twins quickly found the table they'd been looking for, and sat down, practically dragging Ginny along.

To her surprise, they had sat down across from Neville, who was looking at the twins in confusion, then looked at her with an unreadable expression. Ginny couldn't really meet Neville's eyes, knowing that he was one of Harry's supporters, as well. Finally, the awkward silence was broken by the boy they had come to meet.

"So, why did you bring her here? You only said that you had to talk to me," Neville asked neutrally, looking at Fred and George.

It was Fred who answered, placing an arm around Ginny's shoulders protectively. "A few things changed at the Order meeting last night. Looks like quite a few people finally got it into their thick skulls that Harry is on our side in this. Ginny here gave Mom quite a talking to."

"You should've seen it," George added, "it was bloody brilliant!"

At Neville's confused look, Fred leaned in close, though it was unnecessary – the nearest occupied table was a few yards away, filled with four children who were chattering about this and that excitedly. "Look, Nev, Ginny realizes she made a mistake in listening to the drivel Mom's been spewing about Harry, and she's feeling real bad about it. We were wondering if you could, y'know, arrange something."

"I don't know," Neville looked at the twins dubiously. "She was rather vocal in the crusade against Harry. Are you sure that it'd be a good idea?"

Before either of the twins could answer, Ginny had stood, her chair scraping loudly against the ground, and left with a muttered excuse that she had to go to the bathroom. Neither of the three boys missed the tears that she was desperately trying to hold back. They watched as she slid through the door into the parlor, and Fred turned back to look at Neville. "She made a mistake, Nev. She's young, and Mom...well, she can be a real harpy when she's dead set on something. We can't understand it, ourselves, why she'd turn on Harry so quickly, but think about it. She's been pulling every trick in the book to convince everyone she meets of Harry's guilt."

"That's a lot of pressure," George added. "Especially since Mom refuses to talk to the neighbours ever since she found out that they don't believe Harry's guilty. Ginny is afraid that Mom would disown her, or something like that, as unlikely as it would be. But you've got to look at it from her perspective. She was scared and unsure of what to believe, and Mom was there with all the right words."

"I see..." Neville looked torn as he glanced between the twins and the door to the ice cream shop. "You think talking to Harry would help?"

"She almost had a complete breakdown last night, mate. It's really been eating her up, now that she realizes that everyone's been too quick to condemn Harry," Fred informed him.

"And I think it'd do Harry a world of good, too," George added. "I mean, he's got a wife and a kingdom to run now, but maybe some closure with the old crowd would be a good idea. It worked out with Hermione, didn't it?"

"That's a good point," Neville conceded. He'd seen how much more at ease Harry was around other people, after Hermione had gotten him to let her stay, and after Bella had convinced him to give her a second chance – a real chance, not the instant forgiveness Harry had

been so quick to mete out without trying to work through the tension between them. And Harry and Ginny had been rather close, as well, during his last year at Hogwarts. “What do you suggest?” he finally asked.

Fred and George looked at each other briefly, before George replied. “We were thinking maybe we could take her to Nair’i’caix to see Harry. Actually, take her to see Bellatrix first – she seems much better at dealing with people that are coming to beg Harry for forgiveness than he is. See what she thinks, and then she can work on Harry until he agrees to see Ginny.”

“As much as I like springing surprises on Harry, I don’t think just popping in with Ginny is a good idea, so I agree with that,” Neville agreed. He eyed the twins with a suspicious look, and grinned. “Are you sure you aren’t just using that as an excuse to get a grand tour of the castle?”

“Oh gosh darn, there goes our secret plan. Brother dearest, he found us out,” Fred bemoaned theatrically, placing his hands over his heart.

“Well,” George shrugged, “there’s always Plan B.”

The three boys fell silent for a while, until Neville looked at the ice cream parlor with a worried expression. “Don’t you two think you should go look for her? Ginny’s been gone for a while.”

“We’re not going into the girl’s bathroom,” George protested.

“But we’ll knock and see if she’s doing all right,” Fred finished, and the two got up and left. Neville’s worry turned out to be unfounded, as the twins returned a few minutes later with their sister, and Neville could see the tracks left by tears she must’ve hastily wiped away when her brothers had come to get her. Ginny sat down in front of Neville with a sheepish expression, her brothers flanking her on either side.

“Sorry I ran off like that,” she said quietly, not making eye contact. “I deserved that, though. I said some horrible things to Harry, and I understand if you’re mad at me.”

Neville sighed heavily – he somewhat understood what Ginny had been going through, but he couldn’t help but feel a bit of resentment towards everyone who had abandoned Harry. In a sense, Neville understood all too well what it had done to his friend; after all, he had been in a similar situation during his first few years at Hogwarts. He’d been the clumsy one, with very little magical aptitude. He’d been the one who always lost stuff or forgot stuff, which had ultimately left him feeling very much alone, because everyone else always swarmed around the popular people. His gran had been the only one he’d ever called family...but that had changed when Harry had come along. Harry, who had also lost his parents; Harry, who had also spent his whole life as an outcast, and the two had become friends, and Neville liked to think he’d become a better person because of it.

If Neville was brutally honest, then aside from his grandmother, Harry was the only real family he had. Sure, Hermione and Ron were friends, but only Harry ever really bothered to get to know Neville beyond superficialities. Only Harry really knew that Neville was a leader, and only needed the encouragement to become someone others would follow without hesitation. When Neville tried to imagine what he would have felt if Harry had turned his back on him, he could only shudder, and hope that he would have the same strength as Harry to survive it, because it would’ve been a terrible blow.

“Ginny...” Neville began, unsure of what exactly to tell the younger girl.

“You don’t have to pretend you don’t hate me,” the redheaded witch took it from him. “You’ve always been honest with me, Neville, and I understand if you believe we don’t deserve Harry’s forgiveness. I don’t believe I deserve it. But I need to talk to him, I need to let him know that at least some of us have realized what big of a screw-up we’ve made.” Her resolve hardened, and she sat up with her back straight, staring at Neville as if to dare him to disagree. “And I need to tell him that whatever he wants me to do, I’ll do. I will do everything I

can to help him end this war, whether he likes it or not, because that's the only way I can even begin to forgive myself."

Neville shook his head. "No, Ginny, I don't hate you. I...resent you, for turning your back on Harry. The same goes for everyone who should have known Harry, but betrayed him, anyway." His expression softened somewhat when he noticed Ginny taking it like a proverbial man, and nodding in agreement. "But I can understand why you did it, why you believed everyone else over Harry, even when I can't understand why the others did. Public opinion is a powerful thing, and you're young – heck, we're all young, but you look up to your mother for guidance, and she–"

"Can be rather convincing," George chimed in.

Neville nodded. "Right. On the plus side, unlike everyone else, you realized you made a mistake and are willing to make up for it. The only question that remains is this: will having you around and pressing your self-inflicted penance on Harry actually hurt him more or less than just cutting all ties with you?"

"I don't know," Ginny whispered, hanging her head. That was the one thing she hadn't worked out, and despite Fred and George's best assurances that finding closure would be the best thing for both her and Harry, she wasn't yet totally convinced.

"But I think at least talking wouldn't hurt," Neville concluded with a small smile. He reckoned that if he was in Harry's shoes, he would have liked to know that other people believed in him, even if he didn't need them anymore. Closure with the past was something he figured everyone needed – even if they didn't like to admit it.

"So–"

"I think something can be arranged. Give me a few days to run it by a few people, and we'll see," Neville concluded with a small smile. He got the feeling that things were looking up.

“So that’s your plan?” Snape mulled over the information he, Remus, and Moody had been given as Harry informed them of his war council with Xerina and Hiscophney the previous day.

“That Count has a point,” Moody grumbled. “You shouldn’t let your guard down just in the hopes of some magical weapon that will defeat Voldemort and his troops for you.”

“But if Voldemort really did take steps to ensure that his soul is immortal, then how are we going to kill him?” Remus asked.

“It’s not even sure that he did.” Snape glanced at Moody. “As far as I know, he has not yet let anything slip about his alchemical and transformational magicks working. And he doesn’t strike me as the type who wouldn’t not boast about such an achievement. For all we know, he’s perfectly mortal.”

“The way he was perfectly mortal when he was hit by a killing curse and ended up floating around as a spirit for the next ten years?” Remus snorted.

The Potions master glared at that comment. “The circumstances are completely different this time. However, I do agree with the Minister’s assessment that you shouldn’t be dueling Voldemort, Potter. While I admit that you did reasonably well the last time you faced him,” and all present could see the reluctance with which Snape ground that out, “you are nowhere near his level of skill. Or raw power. He’s had decades to study ancient lore and undergo strengthening rituals, and while he was weakened by his physical body dying, he has regained most of his strength since his rebirth.”

“I say we lay a trap and goad him into dueling Potter,” Moody suggested, “and when he does, we spring everything we’ve got at him. Hide a few dozen Unspeakables under invisibility cloaks, and have them use the nastiest curses they can think of.”

“You were thinking of doing something like that, right, Harry?” Remus asked worriedly. “When you said you were planning into forcing Voldemort to attack the Ministry to make him duel you?”

"Of course," Harry rolled his eyes. "What do you think I am, Moony, daft? I know Voldemort doesn't play fair, so even if we can force him to attack the Ministry, he's going to go for an all-out assault. He'll likely bring everything he's got. And that's what I'm counting on," the teenager finished with a feral grin.

"A good idea," Moody concurred. "If you just took down Voldemort alone, we'd spent years hunting down his remaining allies. This way, we can defeat them all in one go."

Harry nodded. "Also, I've got about four thousand troops in reinforcements, from soldiers to battlemages and sorcerers. Eight entire contingents of battle-ready soldiers, just waiting to be sprung on Voldemort's army. I reckon if we can lure him out into bringing everything he's got, then we can hit him with everything we've got. Otherwise, we'll never be able to use the troops I have to full effect. If we can make our stand at a location of our choosing, with fortifications and traps in place, that's even better."

Snape arched an eyebrow at that decidedly un-Gryffindorish behavior. "Why, Potter, that's rather Slytherin thinking of you."

Harry copied Snape's expression with a smirk. "Why, Professor, of course it is. I almost ended up in your house, after all."

"What?" Snape sputtered in surprise, but before he could inquire further, Harry had already changed the subject.

"That reminds me, where's Tonks?" Harry glanced around at them. Out of the adults he trusted that he regularly held council with, only Tonks and Kingsley were absent. He already knew that Mockridge had requested that Kingsley himself supervise the Ministry's renewed campaign against Voldemort, as well as see to the fortifications of the Ministry for the final stand. He hadn't heard from Tonks, however.

"We don't know." Snape, Moody, and Remus glanced at each other. "She's been on some top-secret mission for Dumbledore, and he's

refusing to tell us about it. Mockridge didn't know anything about it, either," Remus finally said.

"And what's worse," Moody growled, "he sent her without backup."

"And that's not all," Snape added. "She's two days overdue. Dumbledore finally let it slip earlier today that he sent her on a mission for him the night you defeated Voldemort at that village."

Harry froze, shock and fear flashing across his face. Please let her be all right, please let her be all right, he repeated silently as he fought to remain calm. The adults had seen the expression on his face, as well, and almost regretted having to tell him, but after having had so much vital information kept from him, they figured he deserved to know. Besides that, the trust he had in the rest of the wizarding world was fragile enough without them trying to get away with keeping secrets from their last best hope in an attempt to sugarcoat the situation for him.

"I'm sure she's fine, Harry," Remus finally said, placing a calming hand on his honorary godson's arm.

"That's right, she's a big girl and a trained Auror," Moody rumbled in agreement. "Though Dumbledore should really have sent her with someone to watch her back. Constant vigilance!"

Harry managed a weak smile that still held a tinge of fear at their efforts to reassure him. "Thanks. Besides, I don't think it's uncommon to be late a day or two on top secret missions, right? I mean, she could've been held up in traffic, or something. Or maybe the weather got too bad for her to travel."

"That's right. She'll be back in no time, you'll see." Remus smiled at him.

Harry took a few moments to get a grip on himself. He was still scared for Tonks, but unless he could press the headmaster for information on where he'd sent her, he couldn't do a thing about it – and although a part of him wanted to go do just that, there were

matters he had to discuss with the three men before he could contemplate squeezing the information out of Dumbledore. “So, is there anything else that’s been going on with the Ministry?”

Snape looked uncomfortable when Remus and Moody both looked at him pointedly. The expression lasted only for a second before his neutral façade slammed back into place. “Minister Mockridge has dispatched teams of Aurors to seize properties that belong to known Death Eaters, as you know. A number of teams have run into trouble – traps, heavy wards, and so forth – but in all, the raids were rather successful. However, the Minister has expressed concern that today, for the first time, the Ministry has lost contact with one of the teams. It’s being led by Amelia Bones, from Magical Law Enforcement.”

“On the other hand, we also have a few good news,” Moody commented. “That new Minister of ours had everyone in the Ministry tested for their loyalty and mind-controlling drugs or spells. You’d be surprised how many came up positive.”

“And here I thought I was just that unpopular,” Harry snorted dryly.

“It’s a step forward, but it’s kind of frightening how far Voldemort’s influence reaches, if he can put that many people in high-ranking Ministry positions under his control.” Remus looked thoughtful. “But now that they’ve been checked, we’ve deprived Voldemort of his main instrument of controlling the government’s actions, which means you should have a much easier time getting people to cooperate.”

“Did anyone check the Order members?” Harry asked.

“Yes, we did. There were no involuntary spies for Voldemort there,” Snape told him, though Harry could tell something was wrong. Upon a pointed glance from the youth, Snape shrugged and told him. “A few of the Order’s reactivated members from the first war turned out to be voluntary spies for the dark lord. They weren’t in any important positions, and were not privy to any vital information, but it’s shaken up a few people on just whom Voldemort has managed to convert.”

"Wait..." Harry began. "You said you checked for mind-controlling spells and potions...what about mind-altering ones?"

"Mind altering potions?" Snape arched an eyebrow. "Such a thing wouldn't benefit the dark lord in any manner he would find useful."

Harry crossed his arms over his chest and looked thoughtful. "Even if it meant getting his worst enemy thrown into Azkaban?"

"What're you saying, Harry?" Remus asked, alarmed.

"I think what Potter is saying is that he suspects a few people who've been rather vocal in disowning him publicly may be under the effects of certain spells or potions," Moody growled, irritated that he hadn't thought of that before. "It's an ingenious plan, and no one would even think to check for a whole number of potions that would have just that effect, because, like Snape said, there's no reason he'd be using them."

"You think Molly and Arthur and the others are under some kind of spell or potion that made them turn against Harry?" Remus looked skeptical. "I don't think so. I mean, Hermione realized she was wrong about Harry on her own, and if there was a potion or some other mind-affecting spell, I don't think she'd have admitted she was wrong."

"You forgot the youngest Weasley, too," Snape added.

"She gave Molly a right talking to the other day," Moody grinned toothily. "It was brilliant."

Harry managed a weak smile, though he really didn't want to think about it. Despite all the talking to by Bella, the betrayal of his friends still hurt. It was getting better – he was now able to look at Hermione without cringing, after all, and he was sure that he was beginning to heal, but he wasn't quite ready for all of them to come running to him begging for forgiveness yet. And, he thought with a dark frown that vanished almost instantly, he wasn't sure he even wanted to forgive some people. It wasn't the Gryffindor thing to do, holding grudges, but

he'd been trying to be the perfect Gryffindor most of his wizard life, and look where that got him.

In the meantime, he had found that he was better off just not thinking about what to do about his former friends for now. After all, he had a war to plan, and there would be ample time to contemplate their fates after the battles were won. For the moment, it was best to let thoughts of the future rest, until they were sure they had a future. The four of them talked things through a while longer, until the adults were satisfied they had a firm grasp on Harry's strategy for the battles to come, because they knew that coordinating efforts on their end with his actions would be vital to defeating Voldemort. Finally, they left, stating that Dumbledore had called another Order meeting to discuss the Order's plans for engaging Voldemort's forces. Harry saw them off, only to turn around and find Bella standing in the doorway behind him, an uneasy expression on her face and a flask with an odd purple liquid in her hands.

"It's complete," she told him quietly.

Harry nodded in understanding, knowing what she meant. The potion and spell she had been researching to cure the Longbottoms was done. Now all that was left was to give it to them.

Chapter 39

By: Claihmsolais

To say that Moody and Snape were surprised to find Tonks at the Order meeting was an understatement, both of them having expected the worst – despite their reassurances to Harry – when Dumbledore had informed them that Tonks had gone missing. But now the metamorphmagus was chatting amiably with Mundungus Fletcher, looking none the worse for wear. Snape and Moody shared a confused glance, before heading over to greet her before the meeting started.

“Tonks,” Moody grumbled, causing the currently-pink-haired Auror to turn around.

“Oh! Moody, Professor Snape! How are you two?”

“We were about to ask you that,” Snape replied, arching an eyebrow as he looked her over. He could swear there was something off about her, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. The feeling disappeared as quickly as it had come, so he dismissed it after a moment, disregarding it as travel-weariness on the Auror’s part.

Tonks shrugged with a wry grin. “I got stuck on the road, and my job for Dumbledore took a bit longer than we’d expected. I just got in a few hours ago, and I really, really want to take a nap.”

Moody and Snape exchanged curious looks. Wizards and witches did not just “get stuck” on the road. They Apparated, flew by broom or travelled by Floo, but they did not just get stuck – Tonks was hiding something, and judging by the way she was now leaning in to whisper to Dumbledore, it had something to do with what he’d asked her to do. The two silently agreed that they’d have to keep an eye on the situation, and keep the headmaster from doing anything rash or stupid, if necessary.

The meeting passed without any major incidents, and an hour later, Snape was the last one in the room, sitting quietly by the fireplace,

staring into the flames with a faraway look as he mulled over the plans that had been made for the next few weeks. Unconsciously, he rubbed his forearm at the Dark Mark that was there. For better or for worse, the war would be over soon. The potions master wasn't sure whether to be relieved or anxious – the final battle as Harry had envisioned would be a titanic clash of forces, with Harry and Voldemort throwing everything they had at the other in an attempt to destroy their target. It would be utter warfare the likes of which the wizarding world hadn't seen in centuries.

Snape almost gagged at the thought of how many dead there would be. It wasn't that he didn't want Voldemort's followers dead, because he most certainly did, but the number of casualties would leave both sides crippled for a long time, no matter who won. He only had a vague idea of how many troops Voldemort had at his disposal, but he had a feeling it ranged into the thousands. The wizarding world, already thinned out by time and their need to hide from muggles, couldn't afford to lose several thousand of their population in a single day. Rebuilding after the war could very well be impossible, at least in England.

There wasn't anything else they could do about it, however. Voldemort was too strong, too smart to fall for little traps. If he was to fall for one, the bait had to be worth it, and there wasn't anything else except total control of the British wizarding world that the madman would consider worth going after. Even if they could destroy Voldemort now, his followers could still inflict huge amounts of collateral damage on the civilian population before they were dealt with, if they weren't taken out immediately. No, Harry's plan was the most viable one to date, and they'd all just have to make sure that they took as many of Voldemort's followers with them before they died. Snape didn't hold any illusions that he'd survive the final battle. He knew the odds of warfare. In a chaotic whirlpool of combat, chances of individual survival were next to none.

In the end, though, none of it mattered. It really all came down to Harry defeating Voldemort. Once either of them fell, the morale of their troops would fall with them. Snape admired Harry's determination to see this war through to the end, but he'd seen the spark of doubt in his eyes. Moody must've seen it, too, judging from

the worried expression on the old Auror's face. They both knew that in a straight-out fight, Voldemort eclipsed any duelist they had in terms of speed, power, and skill by decades. Dumbledore had once been able to stand against him, but that was before Voldemort had been reborn and gained strength. Unlike Dumbledore, who had weakened and slowed ever so slightly with time, Voldemort hadn't lost his edge, and most likely wouldn't for decades to come.

Snape had long since shed his belief that Harry was like his father. In fact, the longer this war continued, the more Harry became a realist. Snape grudgingly admitted that he admired Harry for his decision to finish the war, one way or another, when he could have just run and left the wizarding world behind, or worse, joined Voldemort, after what had happened. But he also knew that Harry didn't hold any false hopes in being able to defeat the Dark Lord. Not without another few years to practice and prepare. Harry was a talented duelist and a quick learner. The way he moved instinctively and his quick reflexes that made him such a great seeker also made him a great duelist, but without experience he had no hope of matching Voldemort's arsenal of spells.

Snape grumbled under his breath. There was a fine line between being realistic, and being pessimistic, and he had a feeling he'd just crossed that line. It wouldn't do to discourage himself before the fight had even begun.

"Professor?"

Snape turned at the unexpected voice. "Longbottom. What are you doing here?"

Neville shrugged and stepped through the doorway. "I was looking for you, actually."

"Really?" Snape arched an eyebrow, his usual sneer plastered on his face, though this time there was no malice in it. In fact, Neville thought, it looked almost weary.

Neville nodded and sat down across from his potions teacher, not waiting for an invitation. The action drew a smirk from Snape as he realized that just a few months ago, the boy wouldn't have had the confidence or the courage to just invite himself into a teacher's solitude – much less Snape's. Either that, or he was losing his edge. Snape preferred to think it was the former, rather than the latter.

The two remained quiet for a while, before Neville finally spoke. "Ginny wants to talk to him. She's really determined to make up for what her family's done, you know."

"I'm afraid there's not much she can do," Snape snorted in disdain. "In the battles to come, half-trained, underage children would only be a hindrance. The same goes for the Legion. You wouldn't last a minute in the chaos of real war."

Neville sighed and nodded. "I figured as much. We've done pretty well in minor skirmishes, but that was where we had the element of surprise, and we outnumbered them. Plus, we've only fought Death Eaters so far. I don't think we could handle a troll, or a vampire."

"Good, because Potter does not need the additional worry about his friends trying to do something stupid and getting themselves killed in the process."

"Thanks for that vote of confidence," Neville muttered under his breath.

"I heard that, Longbottom," Snape smirked. "However, hopefully, there will be no need for the Legion to involve itself in the battles to come. Potter has managed to secure some four thousand troops from his allies, which should be enough to handle Voldemort's army. The only real difficulty lies in dealing with the Dark Lord himself."

"That's...that's good," Neville said with a shrug. "I just wish we could be of more help, you know. Harry's been fighting off V-v-voldemort by himself for as long as I've known him, and it feels wrong to just let him take all the burden of doing the fighting, you know."

Snape took a while to respond to that. "I know, Longbottom," he finally said. "And you're right; it isn't fair that a child has to clean up after the entire British wizarding world. However, you're wrong in that you're letting him face adversity by himself. Your support and the support of the Legion has been invaluable, maybe not in combat, but in giving Potter peace of mind. Also, should we succeed in defeating the Dark Lord, you and the Legion will have a more important task."

"What's that?"

"You are the future, Longbottom. Your generation grew up between these wars, and you know the truth about most of what happened. You've seen the destruction it brings, the death, the fear. When all of us are gone, it will be up to you and your classmates to make sure that, should another dark lord rise, the wizarding world will face him united. You've seen what resulted from the complacency and division of our world in this war with Voldemort. You make sure it never happens again."

The two fell into an awkward silence for a moment, mulling over what the other had said.

"You don't think he can do it, right?" Neville asked, after a few minutes.

"What are you talking about, Longbottom?"

"Harry." Neville leaned back in his chair. "I mean, he's a brilliant duelist and all, but—"

"But he's still just a boy, and his opponent is the most feared dark wizard in centuries," Snape finished. "Voldemort is arguably the most powerful wizard in the world right now, and his magical power and skill know no equal. Is that about right?"

Neville nodded mutely. "Yeah."

"I agree." Snape turned to stare into the dancing flames again. "There is no way an ordinary boy who is only half-trained in magic

and hasn't even finished schooling yet can defeat the dark lord, no matter how gifted a duelist he is. Talent and power only go so far, and they need time to be properly cultivated. Without experience and time, there is no way for anyone to defeat the Dark Lord."

"What about Professor Dumbledore?"

Snape shrugged ever so slightly. "Albus is old, Longbottom. It's true that at the height of his power during the first war, the only wizard Voldemort feared was Albus Dumbledore. However, in the years between then and now, Voldemort has been reborn, and gained more power and more followers, while Albus has aged. The headmaster is slowing down ever so slightly, but even that tiny bit can mean the difference between life and death in a duel between two wizards of their power. While it's true that Albus can match him in skill and magical power, his body isn't getting any younger, while Voldemort's is sustained by rituals and dark magic going back hundreds of years. It'll probably be decades before he loses his edge."

"So there's no way to win, is there?"

"Like I told you before, Potter has the potential to be more powerful than the Dark Lord, but he needs time to grow into that potential. The fact that Voldemort recognized Potter as a threat to him tells me that he is sure that Potter will be able to surpass him one day. He'll do everything he can to make sure that day never comes." Snape glanced back at Neville's poorly-hidden expression of fear, and sighed almost inaudibly. "However, we're talking about Potter here. That boy has managed to pull a miracle out of his sleeve more than once when it counted. Keep that in mind before you decide that the war is already lost."

Having said his piece, Snape stood and left the room, leaving Neville to his thoughts. It was only minutes after Snape had left that Neville remembered what he'd wanted to tell the man, and that he had an urgent message for Harry. Now that Snape had left, he scrambled to find an owl to send the message with.

“Any luck?” Harry sat down next to Bella in the library room of Nair’icaix. He was rather familiar with the room, having spent hours with his wife searching for useful combat spells that she could later drill into him in preparation for his battles with Voldemort. Now both Bella and Hermione were sitting by a window, and three tables they had pulled up next to them were groaning under the weight of a veritable mountain of books and tomes.

“Not so far,” Bella admitted, before pulling out a piece of parchment from her robes. “But your friends at Hogwarts managed to get us a lead.”

“Really?” Harry took the parchment and instantly recognized Neville’s messy scribble.

No mention of the item by name, but “Hogwarts, A History” indicated the Founders were looking for a magical artifact that fits the description, supposedly hidden on a stormy island north of the British Isles. Hope it helps.

“When did this get here?” Harry asked, looking up from the note.

“About ten minutes ago,” Bella indicated all the books they had gathered around themselves. “We got started on pulling all the history books dealing with the old wars and the Founders as soon as we got it.”

She was covering her exhaustion well, Harry realized, but he could hear it in her tone that she was tired. They all were, having worked non-stop since their war council in the hopes of ending the war as quickly as possible, but Bella was pregnant. He gently took the book she was rifling through from her hands and put it on the table next to her.

“Hey! I was reading that-“

“You need some rest.”

“I do not!”

“Do, too!”

“Do no!”

“Do, too!”

“I do not – I can’t believe I’m having this argument with you!” Bella glared at her husband. “You made me argue like a four-year old!”

“Me?” Harry pointed at himself incredulously. “You were the one who started arguing!”

“Well, if you hadn’t taken the book from me, then I wouldn’t have said anything in the first place!” Bella shot back.

The two stared at each other silently for a moment before breaking out into laughter. Across from them, Hermione was carefully hiding a smile behind the book she was reading. When they had calmed down, Harry placed a hand on Bella’s arm. “Seriously, you need some rest. You look dead on your feet.”

“Well, that’s why I’m sitting down.”

Harry blinked as he digested that argument. “I can’t win with you, can I?”

“Sure can’t.” Bella leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. “However, I’m feeling a bit hungry, so I’ll go see if I can find something to eat in the kitchen.”

“And you’ll take a nap, too,” Harry insisted. “Please, Bella.”

“Oh, all right. Just a quick one.” Bella sighed. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“Okay.” Harry watched as Bella rose from her chair and left the room. He stared at the door for a while longer, before settling himself

in the armchair she'd vacated and picking up the book he'd taken out of her hands. The next half hour or so passed in silence, only interrupted by the rustling of pages and the creak of old tomes. The lines of text he was reading through began to blur in front of Harry's eyes as he skimmed over passages telling the gruesome details of the wizarding wars of the past.

In the quiet of the library, the sound of a book slamming closed sounded like a thunderclap, startling Harry into looking up. Hermione had given up and tossed the tome she had been reading on the table in frustration, and was now rubbing her eyes as she leaned back in her armchair.

"Something wrong?"

The girl glanced up and smiled sheepishly as she realized what she'd done. "I'm all right, thanks for asking. It's just...I've been staring at these pages, and the more I read the less I want to know. I never knew wizarding history could be so – so horrible."

Harry glanced down at the text he was reading, and grimaced when he saw that he'd opened the book to a page with a moving picture detailing how goblins had disemboweled their wizard prisoners in detail. "Yeah."

"Harry," Hermione began, only to fall silent when he looked at her.

"What?"

"It's okay, you know," she told him after a while of staring at him intently. "I know you're mad at me, you don't have to pretend to be nice to me."

"What are you talking about?"

She sighed and leaned forward, pulling the book he was shielding his face with down to look into his eyes. "I know you, Harry. I know you're trying to just bottle things up and go back to the way things were

before. It...it doesn't work that way. I know you're trying to be nice to me so you can avoid hurting me, but—“

“You don't know me,” Harry shot back acerbically, yanking his hands away from hers suddenly.

“I know.” Hermione leaned back and stared down at her hands. “I thought I knew you, but when it really mattered, I didn't believe in you. I know you're angry, Harry. There's no way you wouldn't be, after what we did to you.”

“How would you know?”

“I don't. I can't begin to imagine how much we've hurt you, but I know that you must be angry with us. Angry, disappointed, maybe you even hate us. And that's all right. We've given you good reason to.” The brunette girl sighed and seemed to sink deeper into the chair cushions. “But you're trying to hide it. You're trying to stuff everything down into a dark corner of your mind and slam a lid on it. You did exactly the same thing when Sirius died; you refused to let any of us in to help you.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Harry stood abruptly and walked over to the window, his back turned to her. She could hear, though, that despite the forced calm in his voice he was struggling to maintain his composure. She was hitting close to the nerve, judging from the heave of his shoulders.

“This.” Hermione gestured around her, even though she knew he couldn't see. “You're trying to be in control, you're forcing yourself to be nice to me. I don't know about you, but if it were me in your place, it'd be killing me inside if I had forced myself to be nice to someone who'd betrayed me and destroyed my life.”

Harry gave a short, barked, hollow laugh. “You didn't destroy my life, don't get melodramatic, Hermione. You betrayed me, sure, but you didn't destroy my life.”

"I beg to differ," she said, rising from her seat to stand behind her former best friend. "Because I didn't support you, they sent you to Azkaban. After all, if even your best friends believe you were guilty, then you had to be, right? Because I failed to believe in you, you lost everything."

"What do you want, Hermione?" Harry's voice sounded choked.

"For you to let go. You don't always have to be in control, Harry. You're angry, and we deserve it. So be angry. Yell at me. Scream that you want me dead. Hit me. Anything." Hermione hesitantly took hold of his shoulder. "When I came here, I came fully prepared to die for what I'd done to you. You gave me a second chance, and I can't tell you how grateful I am. But...we can't heal, we can't move past this, if you don't let go of the hurt. We both need this, Harry. Please. Show me how much we hurt you. Be angry."

"Did you really think I'd kill you?" Harry spun around angrily, causing her to lose her grip. "Do you really think so little of me? I forgave you, Hermione, isn't that enough? Why do you want to drag up everything that happened before?"

The girl almost shrank back at the pained and angry look in his eyes. Then again, she'd been trying to pull this side of him out, so now it was time to face the music. "No, Harry, I never believed you'd consciously hurt anyone. You forgave me, that's true, but forgiveness without catharsis is meaningless. It's hollow. I know you can't truly forgive me without letting it all out. That's what I want. I don't want you to just forget the past and move on as if it never happened, because it did."

"I—" Harry took a deep, shuddering breath, before opening his eyes again. When he did, Hermione gasped in fear at the depth of emotion she could see, before his mental shields went back up. Only then did she register the pain from her upper arms where he'd gripped on to her in a vise-like death grip. They remained like that for a minute, neither saying anything. He was trying to get his emotions back under control, while she was waiting for the explosion she hoped she'd initiated.

“I can’t,” he finally hissed through gritted teeth. “I can’t lose control. I can’t afford to be angry.”

“Harry-“

“You don’t understand,” he shouted. “I’m fighting a war against someone who’s got almost a century of experience, someone who’s more powerful than me, and the only way I’m going to win it is if I can outwit him. I can’t afford to get angry and lose control, because if I do, people die!”

“You’re going to win this, Harry,” Hermione said quietly, tears forming in the corners of her eyes from both the physical and emotional pain. “Do you know why?” she took a shuddering breath. “Because you care for people. Because you have people who believe in you. That’s something Voldemort doesn’t have, and never will.”

Harry suddenly let go of her and turned back around. “Like you believed me when I told you I was innocent?” he replied softly.

“No,” Hermione answered in an equally quiet tone. “Not like that. Not like the public who hailed you as their savior, either. But like friends and family. Do you know why I believe in you? Why Xerina and the Count believe in you and follow you, despite all logic saying that you’re bound to lose? Because you care for them more than you care for yourself. You always have. And despite everything we’ve done to you, you still care. And that’s why we believe in you.”

“Why? Why couldn’t you have supported me like that back then? Where were you when I needed you?”

Hermione didn’t need to see his face to feel the anguish rolling off of her former best friend in waves. She bowed her head in shame. “We were lost in our own little world. I guess we were more like everyone else than we wanted to believe. I always thought that when it came down to it, I’d stick by your side when it mattered, but I failed you in that. I let everyone else’s opinion override what I knew. I let my respect for authority override my friendship with you when Professor

Dumbledore announced that he believed you were guilty." She was having trouble speaking now, herself. Forcing herself to swallow the lump in her throat, she continued. "I failed as your friend, and I failed as your family. And for that, I'm so sorry."

"You're right, Hermione," Harry finally said after a few minutes of silence. When he turned around, she could see he'd been crying, and she knew that her face wasn't looking any better. "It hurt. It hurt more than you can imagine. We've stuck by each other for five years. We know each other so well...I considered you my sister in everything but blood. And then you – you just..."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm angry, too." Harry took a deep breath. "I was so angry at first. It will probably take a long time for me to get over that anger, but like I told you, for now, I can't afford to get angry. I can't change the past – I can't change what you've done, no matter how much I'd like to, and I have to move on. So for now, that's what I'm doing. I can't do what you'd like me to do. I can't yell and scream at you now. There's a time for that after Voldemort is gone. That's the best I can do."

Hermione looked at the hand he'd stuck out towards her, then at his face. He was holding on to his composure by the skin of his teeth, she could tell, and if she pushed any further now, then she'd be faced with a torrent of emotion she wasn't prepared to deal with right now, and it'd be a distraction to him they couldn't afford. "We really don't deserve you, Harry," she said as she slowly took his hand and held it to her heart.

Harry made a sound that was half-laugh and half sob. "Just...I'm going to collect on that offer of yelling at you when this is all over, all right?"

"Sure." Hermione managed a weak smile. "I'm looking forward to it."

"No, I don't think you do," Harry remarked.

"You're right, but it'll be good – for both of us."

Harry nodded and turned to leave the room. “I’m going to get myself a sandwich. You want anything?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Hermione wiped at her face with the sleeve of her sweater. “Maybe a glass of juice.”

“Okay.” Harry paused in the doorway. Without turning to look at her, he said, “And Hermione?”

“Yes?”

“You were only partially right. You didn’t fail me when it mattered. You aren’t failing me now. And it matters now. More than ever.”

Hermione opened her mouth to reply, but by the time she’d found the words, he was already gone.

Chapter 40

By: Claihmsolais

“Azkaban,” Bella said as she looked around the table. Gathered around were a many of Harry’s friends and allies as they could get a hold of on such short notice. Once she and Hermione had figured out the cryptic clues left in the old legends, with a lot of help from especially the ever-studious Ravenclaws in Potter’s Legion, Harry had figured they had a good shot at finding the Rod and ending the war, so he’d asked everyone who could to come. Arrayed around the table were teachers, students, and soldiers – Remus and Snape sitting next to Neville, Luna, and Parvati; Moody and General Rotan were there, too, and Xerina and Hiscophney finished off the round table. Harry, Bella, and Hermione were spread in between them. Harry glanced around the room; at best, this would be their chance to end the war. He knew the research was hurried, with less than two weeks since the arrival of Neville’s note and this meeting, and that their chances at actually finding the weapon they were hoping for were slim at best. This week and a half had been relatively quiet on both sides; Harry and his advisors assumed Voldemort was preparing for a big attack.

“The clues we have found all lead us there. Thanks to the hint from the Legion, we have managed to narrow down our search, and all the legends, all the stories point us to Azkaban,” Hermione explained further. A magical map of the island appeared in the center of the table, complete with stormy weather and dark seas around it. “This is Azkaban today. Thirteen hundred years ago, it looked like this.”

Bella waved her wand and the stormy, dark island vanished, only to be replaced by what might have been a piece of Ireland. Trees lined the coast, and the sea was no longer wild and untamed. The rocky beaches became long stretches of sand, and the foreboding fortress that now housed prisoners and Dementors, built upon the layers of ruins, was replaced by a castle that was as magnificent as Nair’icaix.

"Thirteen hundred years ago, the island of Azkaban was the seat of House Polairix's mage crafters and artificers. The best and brightest mages, alchemists, and potions makers came there to study and experiment with magical artifacts and creatures," Bella continued. "That may explain the existence of the Dementors – an experiment gone awry. However, after a number of wars, House Polairix realized that Azkaban would make the prime location for military research. The artificers began developing magical weapons, the creators and alchemists began to experiment with beasts for combat. By the time the Rod of Dominion was crafted and used, Azkaban had become the center for warfare development."

"So what happened to the island? It clearly doesn't look anything like this now," Moody grumbled.

Hermione leaned forward and waved her wand over the map, causing it to change back. "History is a little vague on that, and most of what we've just told you was pieced together from various clues. But we're pretty confident on what happened to Azkaban – three centuries after the dark wars, with House Polairix's resources drained from continuing wars and the subsequent reconstruction, Azkaban's ruler, Count Gregorianus Azkaban, decided to make his bid for the throne of Polairix. He believed that with Lord Polairix weakened and the artificers at his command, he had a good chance of overthrowing him."

"Civil war," Rotan commented.

"Exactly." Hermione nodded. "The records suddenly end there, and begin again fifty years later. We can only speculate what happened, but I think it's pretty obvious that House Polairix razed Azkaban and destroyed the records."

"That's all nice and well, but what does this history lesson have to do with the Rod?" Hiscophney asked.

"Count Gregorianus was said to have found a magical artifact he was sure would ensure him victory in his insurrection," Hermione announced triumphantly. "It is described in his personal journal – of

which we only have excerpts – as being a staff bearing the crest of Polairix, sealed away in an ancient tomb, warded by blood and guarded by creatures of darkness. The only way he could have come across it is if it was located in Azkaban.”

That announcement caused an excited murmur to wash across the room, but Rotan put an end to it quickly. “I hate to be the nay-sayer, but what makes you so sure that it wasn’t moved after his rebellion was destroyed?”

“The tomb of Gregorianus is located deep in the ruins of Azkaban,” Bella replied, “which means he never got his armies off the island. I know it’s a long shot, but it’s the best guess we have. We can only hope that because the earlier Lord Polairix was unable to destroy the Rod, the one who defeated Gregorianus didn’t, either. It makes sense, though, that they would replace the Rod where it was found, buried with a rebellion they didn’t want anyone to know about. And who would ever travel to a desolate island like the one they turned Azkaban into?”

“In fact, Azkaban remained unoccupied until Amanda Argoggle stumbled across it by accident in 1823, and it was turned into a prison a mere hundred-fifty years ago,” Hermione added.

“So what’s the plan, then? I don’t suppose that this thing is unguarded, and we have no idea what could possibly be protecting it,” Neville asked, looking around the table.

Bella ticked off her fingers. “We can count on wards, blood wards from the looks of it, which means Harry needs to be there. Any other wards I can take care of. As for what’s guarding it...we haven’t got a clue.”

“We’re going to take a complement of the Ice soldiers that are sitting the place with us,” Harry added. “If we run into a dead end, we’ll pull out and come back another time, with the support we need. For now, we need to go as far as we can. Maybe we’ll even manage to get to the Rod itself.”

"I'm coming along, too." Hermione speared Harry with a pointed look. "Aside from Bellatrix, I'm most familiar with the legend, and I might come in useful."

"What about the rest of us, then?"

Harry glanced around the table. "Okay...Count Hiscophney, Queen Xerina, please begin moving your troops into position. You can coordinate with Kinglsey Shacklebolt at the Ministry to set up defensive positions and wards, spelltraps, and whatever nasty surprises you can think of for Voldemort's forces. Professor Snape, Remus, Moody, please help them with that. Neville – I'm sorry, but the Legion is going to sit this one out. General Rotan, I'd like to make a request. Minister Mockridge will no doubt be a prime target for Voldemort, right after me and Dumbledore. I was wondering if you could personally arrange for his security."

Acknowledgements rang out from across the table, and Harry stood. "Any further questions or suggestions?"

"How will we know if Voldemort has taken the bait?" Hiscophney asked from across the room.

Moody answered for Harry. "Trust me, when he does, we will know," the old auror said.

"Potter, if you're going to go through with this hare-brained scheme of yours to go down into the ruins beneath the fortress of Azkaban, then I'll be coming along with you," Snape called out. "I can do a better job breaking wards than I can baby-sitting soldiers who I know nothing about."

"Amen to that," Moody agreed. "I'd go, too, but someone's gotta tell these Ministry nitwits who is friend and who's foe."

The fortress of Azkaban was an eerie place to be, even without the Dementors and the prisoners. The sea was rough as always, and by the time the boat had arrived, Neville was green in the face, looking like he was going to throw up any minute. Luna, on the other hand,

was smiling serenely as usual. Harry glanced up at the walls he'd spent the worst days of his life behind. That seemed like a lifetime away now. He felt Bella squeeze his hand in a gesture of comfort, and smiled grimly. Some good had come out of that, after all. As they moved closer to the fortress, he could see the changes the guard of Ice soldiers had made. New fortifications had been built, and old ones reinforced. The gates had been replaced and magical lights were littering the place, bathing the formerly pitch-black courtyard in light.

Once the boat settled on shore, they all hurried into the fortress, Harry and Snape leading the way. They were received at the gates by a group of Ice soldiers from the contingent that Harry and Xerina had left on the island when he'd repossessed it from the British Ministry. They exchanged few words, General Rotan having informed the men of Harry's plans and his party's arrival, and then four Ice soldiers led the way down into the deepest level of the fortress they had uncovered.

"We've begun excavating the ruins beneath the fortress," one of them explained as they climbed down rickety stairs in the flickering torch light, "but it's been slow progress, mainly due to the collapse of three different structures on top of each other. There may be more that we haven't identified yet." The soldier gave Harry an apologetic look. "Sorry, milord, but this fortress has been rebuilt so many times it's almost impossible to tell one stage from the next. As it is, we managed to uncover doorways that lead down into the lower ruins, but we have not found anything resembling a tomb or a gravesite yet."

They stopped at the bottom of a staircase that seemed to abruptly cut off in mid-air, and the leading Ice soldier gestured down into the dark space below them. "We have gotten this far, but it appears someone deliberately destroyed any means of going deeper down into the fortress ruins. No matter where we excavate, we encounter the same difficulty, as if any path further down into this castle's history was sabotaged."

Harry glanced down the sheer drop before them and kicked a pebble over the edge. It vanished after only a second, swallowed by the darkness beneath. He frowned and then kicked another pebble down,

straining his ears to listen for the sound of impact. When he heard nothing, he looked around for something bigger. The rest of his party had noticed his odd behavior and was standing back, watching him in confusion as he picked up a galleon-sized rock and hauled back, hurling it down where the stairwell was broken off.

This time, all of them heard it, the distinct crack of stone against stone, even as they watched the rock sail down into the darkness. “Not sabotaged,” Bella finally commented, “warded.”

Snape and Bella took a step forward, standing precariously on the edge of the very last stair they could see, and drew their wands. “Finite Incantatem,” they intoned in unison, hurling the dispelling charm at the wards before them. When nothing happened, Bella frowned and began muttering more complex charms, Snape matching her phrase for phrase as the two attempted to unravel the spell that had been woven around the ancient ruins.

While they were working, Harry pulled Neville and Luna aside. “Did Bella talk to you about the potion for your parents?”

“Yeah.” Neville nodded. “I’m...she wants to wake them up as soon as possible.”

“I’m sensing a ‘but’ coming...”

“I don’t know,” Neville shrugged. “I’m not sure if we should wait till this is all over, you know? They already lived through one war...and what if...what if we wake them up now, only to get killed when the fighting starts again?”

Harry didn’t quite know what to say at the distraught look on his friend’s face, even as Luna put an arm around the other boy’s shoulders. “The only guarantee for victory is love,” the girl said with a soft smile, causing both boys to look at her strangely.

“It’s your call, Neville. But honestly, if it were my parents...I’d want to talk to them, at least once.” Harry smiled sadly. “But I understand

your reasons. Whatever you decide, let me know, and we'll arrange things, all right?"

Neville nodded, sniffling slightly. "Thanks, Harry."

"We're done!" A brilliant flare of light lit up the ruined staircase, and when it faded, gone were the moldy walls and crumbling bricks, replaced by gleaming marble and fine mosaics.

"What the—"Harry gaped at the sight around him. The group slowly wandered into the exquisite mausoleum, looking around themselves in awe at the statues and paintings that presumably depicted the failed uprising. At the center of the grand hall was a sarcophagus, intricate designs carefully chiseled into the sides and lid. A flowing inscription ran along the side of the stone coffin. Neither Snape nor Bella could begin to translate the strange writing – it wasn't English, or Latin, or Gaelic. Oddly enough, it was Luna who offered a translation.

"Here lies the last master of freedom in eternal rest. Peace to all, but death to those who dare to enter," she recited, her eyes unseeing, once again making Harry wonder if Luna wasn't the seer Trelawney always claimed to be.

The small group looked at each other in confusion. "Are we in the wrong place?" Neville asked, "I mean, I thought this guy led the rebellion against Polairix, didn't he?"

"No, this is the right place." Bella countered as she examined the mosaics that were set into the walls of the chamber; mosaics that were, uncharacteristically, unmoving. "This is the rebellion, look. And here's the rod he's holding."

"Then I don't get the inscription."

"Longbottom, once again you fail to look beyond the obvious," Snape replied, though Harry noted that he was lacking his usual acerbic tone. "In war, history is always written by the victors, and sadly, that history is often very biased. It may very well be that the

history books, which give only a brief description of the uprising, have omitted significant details. Maybe the Lord Polairix of the time was a tyrant. Maybe Gregorianus was more than a power-hungry usurper. I find it difficult to believe that in millennia, not one of the heirs of House Polairix was corrupt or tyrannical."

"So if he's buried in there, then that's where the Rod is?" Harry asked as he approached the sarcophagus apprehensively.

"Most likely," Snape agreed.

Harry was about to reach out and touch the lid when one of the Ice soldiers stopped him. "It may be dangerous. We don't know what kind of protection is on this, milord. I suggest you allow one of us to try opening it," the man said.

The young lord of Polairix was about to protest when Bella caught his eye and she shook her head. He reckoned it was just one of those things that came along with being a ruler of so many people. It didn't mean he had to like it, though, he thought with a frown as he stepped back to let the soldier to his work. No, putting someone else in harm's way just because everyone else believed him to be more important was not something that sat well with him.

The sarcophagus opened without problems, and the small party gathered around to peer inside, only to find that it was-

"Empty." Bella swore under her breath. There was nothing in there, no mummy, no remains, no rotting corpse or magically preserved body.

"We made this whole trip for nothing?" Snape grumbled as he looked around the chamber, trying to figure out what was going on. While he didn't exactly like Bella – especially since he knew just what the woman was capable of – he held no illusions about her intellectual ability. Nor did he doubt Hermione's ability to conduct research, not after having to deal with the Muggleborn witch for six years. No, if both of them agreed that this was the most likely place

for the Rod of Dominion to be, then it was here. Or it had been, at some point.

“This makes no sense,” Bella commented as she traced the inscriptions on the sides of the sarcophagus with an expression of intense concentration. “Why put up all of this for an empty coffin?”

“Grave robbers, maybe?” one soldier offered.

Bella shook her head. “I don’t think so. Nothing’s been damaged, and I highly doubt any robbers would have made it past the wards. Not to mention the fact that in recent times, Azkaban has been inhabited, and not exactly by friendly creatures, either.”

“So the body got moved, then, maybe?” Neville suggested, looking a little lost. He was there more to support Harry, knowing full well that he wouldn’t be much use when it came to curse-breaking, but wanting to do something nevertheless.

“Maybe...”

Snape stopped short at one of the walls of the chamber, the one opposite to the stairway they had entered through. “I don’t actually think the body was ever here to begin with,” he finally said, after studying the inlaid mosaics. When he had everyone’s attention, he pointed out three separate places on the wall. “Look here, here, and there.”

Harry squinted at the wall, trying to figure out what the potions master was talking about. The wall Snape was standing in front of was depicting the death of Gregorianus at the hands of the ruling Lord Polairix, the mosaic painstakingly put together from thousands of little, one-eighth inch square pieces of colored stone and almost frighteningly realistic, down to the vivid sky-blue color of the mantle fluttering around the dying Gregorianus.

Wait a minute... Harry thought as he took several steps closer to the wall. The mantle Gregorianus was wearing was a solid sky-blue, but there was something off about it, something that he couldn’t quite put

his hands on. He reached out to touch the mosaic, feeling the smooth stones beneath his fingertips, and traced the outline of the cape, the rest of the world forgotten for the moment.

And then he froze when he felt a roughness that was completely out of place. Looking down at his hands, found a little silver spot embedded in the place of one of the blue tiles in the mantle, the color completely alien amidst the rest of the mosaic, small enough to be missed on anything other than a close inspection. Glancing around at the other places on the wall Snape had pointed out, Harry could make out faint glints of silver, now that he knew what to look for.

“What are these?” he asked, not really expecting an answer.

“Blood gems,” Snape replied after a moment, a hint of awe in his voice. “They’re very rare and very powerful magical catalysts, usually used to key blood magic. They’re very expensive, because they cannot be made, and must be mined from very specific locations deep beneath the ground. Dwarves used to mine them centuries ago, until they became extinct. A number of wizards tried to use the old mine shafts to do it themselves, but very few actually managed to survive that deep down, much less return with usable blood gems,” he clarified a moment later.

“So...what are they doing in this wall?”

Snape walked along the wall then turned as he reached the end, and started on the adjacent wall. “There’s some here, too. This is odd...they’re in no particular pattern. This isn’t a rune. At least not one I recognize.”

“Runes?” Harry blinked, wishing Hermione was there to explain things to him. Bella was off on the wall opposite to Snape, looking for a pattern, herself, which left Harry, Neville, and Luna standing next to the sarcophagus along with the Ice soldiers. Feeling like he wasn’t being much help, Harry resigned himself to looking at the walls, trying to see if he could spot the gems. With a lot of squinting and moving his head around so the ambient light caught the small slivers of silver,

he managed to distinguish fourteen on the wall Bella was standing in front of, and fourteen in the wall Snape was looking at.

Harry turned around, looking behind him at the mosaic and again found fourteen gems. I'm beginning to see a pattern here, he thought in amusement. The gems were arrayed in squares. Fourteen gems formed six adjacent squares in the shape of an elongated cross that was three squares wide and four squares tall. He brushed his hand over one of the gems again, trying to see if he could maybe push it in or pry it loose...

"Ouch!" Harry pulled back his hand, even as every eye in the room fixated on him at his sudden outcry. "The wall stung me," he said, wiping his now bleeding index finger on his robes.

Bella was about to berate him for not being careful when the ceiling opened up with a loud rumble, but instead of the stormy skies of Azkaban, it showed nothing but a brilliant white glow that forced them to shield their eyes. Harry barely noticed as the gems in the walls began to glow and pulse with the opening of the ceiling. A second rumble went through the hall, and the gems turned from silver to a blood-red hue that he assumed had given them their names.

Beams of light, their red a stark contrast to the white light from overhead, arced through the room, crisscrossing in the middle of the hall, forming a pattern Harry had never seen before. Before long, the light from above and the beams from the gems faded again, leaving them in the ambient light from the chamber itself, but what hovered in the center of the room was what had gotten everyone's attention.

Though the beams from the gems had been cut off, a glowing figure remained, sustained by magic. Lines of glowing red light crossed each other, forming a series of eight cubes, four of them stacked vertically with the remaining four arranged near the top, forming a kind of three-dimensional cross. It hummed serenely as it hovered, like a sleeping guardian, over the marble floor.

"What in Merlin's name is that?" Bella whispered in awe as they approached it carefully. Snape shook his head to indicate that he, too,

had never encountered anything like this before. He reached out a hand close to one of the glowing lines, only to yank it back quickly, looking at his hand in confusion. The skin was red, as if he'd almost been burned, though for that to be the case, the entire chamber should be warming up at an alarming rate.

Harry, noting Snape's reaction to the apparition, took a different approach, and began inching the tip of his ivory wand closer to one of the corners of the thing. When nothing happened and the wand didn't burst into flames from the same heat that had almost burned Snape, Harry closed the remaining distance and touched the corner formed by three glowing bars of light. To his surprise, his wand passed right through it. A sudden rumble went through the room again, and the object in the air solidified, sheets of light forming between the vertices of the structure. The outside of the tesseract glowed blood red for a brief moment, before fading to a dull, semi-transparent light red. Inside, hovering in the air, was a jet black staff.

"Merlin!" Bella had moved to stand behind Harry, and was gripping on to his shoulder in awe. "We did it," she whispered.

"Are we sure this is it?" Neville asked dubiously. "I mean, it doesn't look like a powerful magical artifact." And he was right. The staff was a simple rod, roughly six feet tall, and an inch and a half in diameter. Whether it was painted black, or that was the natural color of the material it was made of was impossible to tell.

"Only one way to find out," Harry muttered as he reached for the staff.

Bella's cry of horror echoed around the chamber as Harry was thrown a dozen feet through the air to land hard on his back. He tumbled and rolled for a few moments, before groaning in pain. The witch was at his side before he could try to rise. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" she asked frantically.

"I'm fine...I think," Harry muttered. "Lost my glasses somewhere."

Bella glanced around and located the errant visual aid. Summoning it silently, she passed them to Harry, who promptly placed them on his nose. "Guess I won't be trying that again," he managed with a weak chuckle.

"No, you're not."

Harry glanced back at where Snape and the Ice soldiers were looking over the now solid construct. "Any idea what the heck that is?"

Bella shook her head. "It's unlike anything I've ever seen, I'm afraid. Usually when you're breaking or erecting wards a skilled mage can 'feel' the connecting magic threads, and then with some effort and time, he or she can figure out how to unravel the spell and neutralize it. This..."

"There's nothing," Snape commented from the other side of the hall. "It's not giving off any magical signature. It does not trigger any of the detection and identification spells I've been using, and it seems completely incorporeal, despite evidence to the contrary." Snape nodded at Harry, then proved his point by chucking a small rock at the thing. The surface rippled as the rock passed through, only to completely disappear. It reappeared an instant later, but not where they had expected it to. Instead of coming out of the other side, the rock had emerged from the top, falling 'up' towards the ceiling, before gravity took hold again and forced it back into the construct. It bounced around, emerging from random locations for a few more minutes, before finally dropping out the bottom.

"For all intents and purposes," Snape commented, "this thing shouldn't even exist."

"So what do we do now?" Neville asked.

Snape grimaced. "As much as I hate to say it, the headmaster would probably be of more help here. Maybe he has seen something like this before. As it stands, I have no idea where to even begin to deconstruct this ward. If it is, in fact, a ward."

"I have to agree," Bella admitted sourly, her expression softening as she noticed the dour look on Harry's face. "It's the only thing I can think of, Harry," she told him. "We don't have the time to go looking for more information in the libraries."

"I know." Harry nodded grimly. He was getting the sinking feeling something bad was about to happen, even as they all hurried back to the surface to get back to Nair'i'caix.

Chapter 41

By: Claihmsolais

Albus Dumbledore was a man who had seen many things in his long life – and a lot of them were very unpleasant. He had seen every side of human existence, the good, and the bad. Heroism and cowardice. Selflessness and selfishness. The extraordinary kindness people were capable of and the extraordinary cruelty that came along with it. War was ugly by nature, and he'd resigned him to seeing people die, sometimes in a very gruesome manner. Nothing, however, had prepared him for the sight when Kingsley Shacklebolt had called him to the Ministry of Magic on urgent matters. Arthur Weasley had found a stomach-turning note left by Voldemort when he had come in to work that morning.

A message that had been written in blood. On the back of one of their Aurors, the words carved into the flesh, the man's organs strewn about him in a gruesome star-pattern. And the worst thing? His heart had still been beating when Dumbledore had arrived.

The message was simple, short, and left Dumbledore with a feeling of dread. It consisted of only two words.

Two Days.

The headmaster had rushed back to the Order headquarters and immediately called for an emergency session. Voldemort had taken the bait, and the battle would be upon them soon. Both sides knew that this was a trap, and both would throw everything they had at each other, in the hopes of completely wiping out their opposition. Dumbledore steeled himself as people started trickling in. Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived first, after having left a number of Unspeakables in charge of cleaning up the mess, followed shortly by a few other aurors. Tonks came with them, bringing the Weasley twins and Ginny with her.

In short order, a large portion of the active members of the Order of the Phoenix had assembled to the emergency call Dumbledore had sent out, almost a hundred people in all, from all parts of the country. The aging headmaster glanced around the assembled faces, some of which he knew very well, and cleared his throat.

"I apologize for calling you all here on such short notice," he began, "however, we have a situation. Most of you are aware that with the help of the current Lord Polairix, we have drafted a plan to lure Lord Voldemort into an open battle at the Ministry of Magic, so that we can destroy all of his forces and supporters at once. Until now, it was uncertain whether he had taken our bait, but not anymore." Dumbledore's face fell. "Auror Gadwell, who went missing two nights ago, was found early this morning, bearing a message from Voldemort. He will attack the Ministry in two days. The defenses are not yet all in place, and our troops not in position, hence the reason I've asked you to come here. We must—"

Before he could go on, the fireplace roared to life once again, the flames turning green and licking up angrily. Before anyone could ask what was going on, spells started flying out of the fireplace – most of them were dark curses, interspersed with the occasional green flash of the killing curse. The assembled Order members broke out into panic and rushed from the room, trying to find cover from the relentless spellfire. Finally, the barrage ceased, leaving scores of dead witches and wizards on the ground, and hooded and masked figures began pouring out of the flames.

Dumbledore's eyes widened in shock as he realized what this meant. Order headquarters had been compromised. Most of the survivors had managed to find some sort of cover, kneeling behind upturned tables or behind the doorways in the corridor. They were about to return fire, when a cold voice spoke with a distinct hiss in its tone.

"Dumbledore," Lord Voldemort drew out the name, spitting it out like an insult. "Today is the day you die. It will bring me great pleasure to finally see you on the ground, writhing in pain."

The old headmaster froze, hoping against hope that he was dreaming. “It’s no matter, Tom,” he finally replied after a long silence. “Even if we fall, others will take our place. There will always be those who fight for freedom.”

“Like that golden boy of yours, Harry Potter?” Voldemort laughed, and Dumbledore didn’t have to see him to know there was a disgusted sneer on the man’s snake-like visage. “Oh, wait, I forgot...you sent him to Azkaban. I bet that went over real well. Tell me, Dumbledore, how does it feel to have sent an innocent child into that hell, hmm?”

Murmurs sprung up from the Order members who hadn’t known the whole story yet, as well as from those who had still believed Harry guilty. Dumbledore ignored them, instead straightening up and looked Voldemort in the eye. “That will always be the biggest mistake I’ve ever made, Tom. I just thank Merlin every day the boy is who he is, because no matter what, he will stop you.”

“Brave words, Dumbledore. Unfortunately, you’re right, the boy just stubbornly refuses to be turned.” The dark lord grinned toothily. “However, there it will also have been the last mistake you ever made. Avada Kedavra!”

“How did it go?” Hermione asked as soon as they stepped through the main gates of the fortress Nair’i’caix, where their portkey had dropped them off.

“We need the old man’s help,” Harry growled. “There’s some wards we’ve never seen before. Is the headquarters still at Number 12, Grimmauld?”

The brunette girl nodded as they headed for the fireplace, Snape, Bella, Neville, and Luna behind them. “Did you find it?”

“We found it, all right,” Snape replied. “Behind some kind of shield, shaped like a three-dimensional cross made up of cubes. I’ve never

seen something like that – it won’t allow us to touch the damn rod, but it’ll let through inanimate objects. And it’s exhibiting the strangest behavior I’ve ever seen.” The potions master frowned. The fact that the strange ward completely baffled his magical senses completely frustrated him. The only consolation was that Bella had no idea what to do about it, either.

“Behaved strangely? How so?”

It was Bella who answered, cutting Snape off with a sidelong glance. “A rock thrown in on the side would come out on top – a rock dropped in from on top would come out the side. Things like that. An object inside would ‘fall’ from one cube to the next, bouncing around and disappearing and reappearing at completely random points.”

Hermione blinked at the odd description. “Can you draw it, or something?”

“It won’t do much good,” Snape grumbled. “Most wards are independent of shape. You of all people should know that, Granger.” Despite his protest, though, he projected an image of the ward from his wand.

The sharp intake of breath from Hermione caused the little group to stop. “What is it?” Harry asked.

“It’s a tesseract!” The brunette girl exclaimed. “They’re supposed to exist in theory only, I mean, this is–”

“What in Merlin’s name is a tesseract?” Bella blinked in confusion.

“It’s a three-dimensional construct that isn’t really three-dimensional at all,” Hermione explained. At the looks of incomprehension she received from the others, though, she drew her wand and trailed it through the air, forming a square. “It’s a muggle concept in physics. A square is two-dimensional. Now, if we extend a square into three dimensions, we get a cube.” She added a few lines and a parallel square. The image floated there for a moment, before resolving itself into a cube.

“If we unfold the three-dimensional cube into two dimensions, we get an array of squares,” she continued, and with a flick of her wand, the glowing cube hovering in mid-air unfurled into a flat cross of six squares. “A tesseract is basically the same thing taken to the next level – if we push a three-dimensional cube into four-dimensional space, we get a hypercube. Because we can’t visualize a hypercube, much like a two-dimensional being could not visualize a three-dimensional cube, we can only see its projection. A tesseract is what you get when you unfurl a hypercube into three-dimensional space, it’s the equivalent of flattening a cube into squares!”

The looks she was getting let Hermione know that she’d lost the others through her explanation. With a sigh, she simplified it yet again. “Somehow, the rod’s been shifted into four-dimensional space. All that you’re seeing right now is its projection on three-dimensional space.”

“So, how do we get to it?” Bella asked.

“Not a clue.” Hermione shrugged. “It’s been theorized that four-dimensional space can be accessed via something called exotic matter, but then again, it’s only been a theory in physics so far. I don’t know about anything magical that would allow travel to higher-dimensional space. In fact, it seems wizards aren’t even aware of it.”

Before Snape could reply to that, Tess came running up to them, three familiar redheads in tow. “Milord!” the urgency in her tone was unmistakable, even as she and the three Weasleys skidded to a halt in front of Harry’s party.

“What’s going on?” Harry asked, shocked at the disheveled appearance of the twins. His eyes widened in shock when he realized Ginny was with them, her robes covered in dirt and scorch marks all over the three of them. Fred was dragging one leg, while George was letting one arm hang limply at his side – whether it was broken or not, Harry couldn’t tell.

“Order headquarters...under attack,” Fred managed to gasp out.

“Voldemort’s troops came out of nowhere, just started pouring out of the fireplace. The old man’s holed up there, but they can’t hold out for long,” George added as he cradled his injured arm with a grimace. “Dunno how they found the place, but Harry – it’s bad.”

“We took the emergency portkey you gave us. Took her with us, no other choice,” Fred said apologetically.

Harry barely spared a glance at Ginny. She was silent, and right now that was fine by him – he had more important things to worry about than sorting out their relationship. “General!” he hollered, and an instant later, both Rotan and Hiscophney came rushing into the room. “Get your strike teams ready,” Harry ordered. “We need to move, and fast. Five minutes, prepare portkeys to Number 12, Grimmauld Place. Voldemort made his move.”

The two old soldiers nodded and returned a few minutes later with a dozen men each, fully armed and armored and ready to fight. In the meantime, Harry had managed to put on his armor with some help from Bella, and Snape had been similarly outfitted with a plate mail that Tess had brought up from the castle’s armory. Neville, Luna, and Bella would be remaining in the castle for this fight, and even though Bella understood the reasoning, she didn’t exactly like letting Harry go off to fight the dark lord alone.

When everyone was ready, Harry nodded at Tess. “Get them to a healer, and be prepared to receive wounded.” He turned to the complement of soldiers that had been assembled, and said, “Let’s go.”

Half of the men grabbed a hold of quickly charmed portkeys, while the rest dove into the fireplace.

Travelling by Portkey or Floo was usually a disconcerting experience on its own, but having to dive out of a fireplace and straight into the middle of a firefight was a whole different thing. Harry felt the familiar

Iurch as he left the fireplace, and the first thing that hit him was the acrid stench of burning flesh. Rolling to the side to make room for the rest of his troops, he came up in a crouch, wand poised and spitting disarming hexes at the few Death Eaters that remained in the room. The two men that had been left behind to guard the place as the fighting moved deeper into the mansion fell quickly, even before the dozen ice soldiers had managed to assemble.

Harry gestured towards the soldiers, and they filed out of the room quietly, sweeping through the empty hallways. The young lord of Polairix suppressed the nauseous feeling that assaulted him as they passed countless dead bodies as they made their way through the mansion. Most of them were unfamiliar to him, but what struck him was that many of the dead Order members were old – likely veterans of the first war with Voldemort, or even the conflict with Grindelwald. They had given as good as they had got though, and dozens of men wearing the black robes and skull masks of the Death Eaters were scattered throughout the building, dead or dying.

It took them a while to reach the other team, led by Count Hiscophney, that had portkeyed into the building's front lawn and made its way in from the front door. The Count shook his head when they met up. "No survivors," he muttered quietly, causing Harry's heart to sink.

It was only after they made their way deeper into the building that they found out the battle wasn't yet over. Screams and shouts of anger echoed through the halls as they passed by the storage area that was adjacent to the kitchen. Hiscophney waved off Harry's attempt to approach directly, and gestured towards his own squad of sorcerers. The light in the hallway dimmed with a wave of his hand, and in the already dark hallway, the sorcerers almost perfectly blended with the shadows as they crept around the corner, only to unload a withering barrage of magical fire into the unsuspecting Death Eaters' backs.

Harry swung himself around the corner the instant the sorcerers called out their spells, the company of ice soldiers and Snape right behind him as they tore into the remaining Death Eaters. The battle was over quickly – pinned down between the defenders, who had

barricaded themselves behind magical shields and upturned tables, and the experienced troops of the Ice People and Trazkaban sorcerers, the men went down quickly and painfully.

“Don’t shoot! We’re friendlies!” Harry shouted before either side could get it into their heads to shoot at anyone else, especially the sorcerers, who looked rather close to Death Eaters, themselves, with their long black cloaks.

“Potter?”

“Moody? That you?” Harry asked as he made sure all of his people had stood down.

“Damn straight.” The grizzled old Auror stood from behind one of the blackened and charred tables, his wand raised into the air above his head in a non-threatening gesture. “Glad to see you, Potter. That was one ugly furball we were in.”

Harry breathed out a sigh of relief. At least someone was still alive. One by one, the wizards and witches that Moody had barricaded himself with stood, all of them raising their wands into the air first. The tension between the two groups was still there, especially after the British wizards recognized Harry, but he ignored it in favor of looking over his friend. Moody was a little worse for wear, with blood dripping down his left sleeve and a deep gash in his right shoulder that was only partially mended, but he was steady on his feet and undeterred.

“There’s more of us holed up in places somewhere down here,” the old auror told Harry, “a lot of them made it down into the cellars. We posted up barricades like these at all the entrances, trying to hold those filthy Death Eaters back, but it was looking pretty bad for a while. Voldemort is here.”

“Voldemort?” Harry’s eyes widened. “Why are you even here? I thought you’d all be at the Ministry, setting up for the big attack?”

“We were,” Moody said. “Then one of our missing aurors from Miss Bones’s team was found early this morning in front of the Ministry.

Voldemort got to him and carved a message in blood. He accepts your challenge, and will attack in two days. Dumbledore called up all the retirees and reserves the Order ever had to rally them for the final battle, but Voldemort somehow must have found out about this place. They came only minutes after we'd all assembled and started pushing us back."

"How'd he even know about this place? I thought it was under the Fidelius charm?"

"So did we," Moody growled. "There's only one possibility. We've got a traitor in our midst."

Harry turned to Hiscophney. "We've got to get the other survivors out of here."

The Count nodded. "We can assemble them and use our emergency portkeys to take them back to the castle in groups."

"I'll take you downstairs. There's some nasty surprises we found when we cleaned the place out," Moody offered.

"All right." Hiscophney signaled his men, and the sorcerers and ice soldiers spread out. While Moody led a number of them down the stairs to retrieve the surviving Order members, Hiscophney, Harry, and Snape split the remaining eighteen soldiers between them to clear out any remaining Death Eaters. It didn't take them long, between the skill of Harry's forces and the element of surprise, the Death Eaters that remained were rounded up and either killed or captured. There was no trace of Voldemort, though, and Snape suspected that the dark lord had left after the main body of resistance had been crushed – he had a battle to prepare for, after all.

All in all, they found forty-six survivors, out of what Moody had claimed had been at least a hundred people. Harry was relieved to find Tonks among the uninjured. Thirty-eight Death Eaters were counted as either dead or captured, according to Hiscophney's report, though Harry found it only a small consolation as they collected the bodies of the dead.

“Milord?” one of the ice soldiers spoke up tentatively as he approached Harry.

“Yes?”

“We’ve found something you should take a look at, sir.” The soldier didn’t miss the way Harry was taking in the carnage around him, the way the dead were mauled and maimed. This had long gone past the killing curse – at least, an Avada Kedavra was clean and quick, painless. The way the Death Eaters and Order members had fought, on the other hand...many of the corpses bore the marks of vicious curses or the creative use of other spells. One Death Eater had been found partially frozen and partially burned. One elderly witch from the Order had been found with a flesh-eating curse dissolving her skin and organs. Cutting and blasting hexes, fire and ice spells, lightning bolts and dark curses had left their marks not only on the walls and floors, but also on the bodies.

This had long gone beyond just a battle. This had been about absolute, unadulterated hatred. The witches and wizards on either side hadn’t fought to kill or capture, they’d fought to cause pain, to inflict as much harm on the enemy as possible. Harry shuddered. Despite all he’d seen so far, this viciousness caused bile to rise in his throat. In the end, though, it only strengthened his resolve to bring an end to Voldemort’s reign of terror, because if this kept going, then the wizarding world was well on its way to self-destruction. If Voldemort didn’t destroy it, then the hatred he was sowing would tear it apart a handful of years down the road.

There was one more thing that Harry dreaded with each survivor they found. Everyone they had recovered so far had said that Dumbledore had faced off against Voldemort, and that their duel had carried them well away from the main fighting. Neither one of them had been seen again. Harry got the sinking feeling that Voldemort may have succeeded in what he had for so long been trying to do – kill one of the greatest mages of all time.

Even as he followed the ice soldier, the feeling of dread in his gut that he'd had since they found the Rod of Dominion solidified into solid ice. They passed by other soldiers and sorcerers that carried the bodies of the dead to the area that had been the living room. Of course, the living room no longer had any walls to separate it from any of the surrounding rooms, but that was a boon right now, as the dead bodies accumulated there.

And then they rounded a final corner, and stepped into a room that had been utterly devastated. So devastated, in fact, that the room was gone. The building just ended. He could tell there had been a room there, most likely a ball room or large reception area, just from the piles of rubble that indicated where the walls had once been, but everything else was gone. There was no trace of the ceiling, nothing left of the furniture, and the ground, once solid marble, from what he could tell of the few inches at the door that had survived the cataclysmic battle, was scorched, torn, and blown apart.

Harry stepped into the outside hesitantly, and looked at what the ice soldier had wanted to show him.

The still face of Albus Dumbledore.

Chapter 42

By: Claihmsolais

The fortress of Nair'i'caix was a mess. Healers were rushing to and from the large halls of the castle, where triage areas had been hastily set up to deal with the wounded that were coming in from the ruined Order headquarters. All activity ceased, however, when a group of sorcerers appeared, Harry in their midst, carrying the body of Albus Dumbledore. Everyone, from healers to ice soldiers and Trazkaban sorcerers paused as they watched them carry the old headmaster away from the triage area in silence. Hermione came skidding into the room, only to stop dead in her tracks, her jaw hanging open in disbelief.

"Harry?" she whispered as he walked past. Uncharacteristically for him, he turned down a corner, ignoring everyone else. The brunette hurried after him, finding him just out of sight of the main hall, leaning against the wall. "Harry?" she repeated.

"Damn." Hermione jumped as Harry turned around and punched the wall. He hauled back to punch it again when she reached out and took hold of his arm before he hurt himself.

"What happened, Harry?" she asked him softly. She'd only managed to get a brief explanation from Fred and George that the Order headquarters had been attacked.

It took a while for him to compose himself, and Hermione looked on in concern at the shrouded look in her friend's eyes. "Someone betrayed the Order," he told her quietly, "and they got ambushed. Voldemort wanted to send a message. We've got two days before he attacks the Ministry."

"Merlin! What about the headmaster?"

Harry shrugged. "I assume he dueled Voldemort. There wasn't much left of the room they were fighting in." Tilting his head back, he leaned back against the wall and sighed in resignation. "Damn." He didn't

know whether to feel frustrated, angry, or sad. The headmaster was gone, and while Harry hadn't especially been fond of him lately, he hadn't wanted him dead.

"Milord!" Both teenagers turned around at Tess's voice. The girl came running down the hall, a healer from the ice people in tow. "Milord, Master Healer Revan needs to talk to you urgently!"

The man that followed Tess was tall and had the same pale complexion as most ice people. He was dressed in a long white robe that indicated his status as a doctor, and carried with him a book full of notes. "Lord Polairix," he greeted Harry with a nod.

"What is it?" Harry blinked in confusion, uncertain of what was going on. "Shouldn't you be with the other healers in the grand hall?"

"I was, milord, when they brought in Headmaster Dumbledore." Revan frowned for a moment before continuing. "I noticed that his body was still warm when they carried it in, and decided to investigate. To my surprise, I found that he was not dead, milord."

"Not dead?" Hermione and Harry echoed in disbelief.

"No, he is quite alive. Gravely injured from numerous dark curses, but alive nonetheless. He is in a coma, milord, his vital functions somehow slowed down so much that it appears he is almost dead." The healer gestured for them to follow as he turned around and led the way back into the depths of the castle.

"A coma?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Not exactly, more along the lines of suspended animation," Revan corrected himself. "It is rather remarkable, it appears he placed himself in it, because he should be dead on account of his wounds, but with his heart and respiratory system slowed down, he has managed to stay alive."

Harry looked over at Hermione as they fell in step with the healer. "Have you ever heard of anything like that happening?"

“Not that I know of.”

They reached the room Dumbledore had been moved to, and Harry stared in surprise at the healers and nurses that were moving around the room, casting diagnostics spells and discussing possible cures and potions that might help. The whole situation rather surprised Harry, considering all the injured that had been brought in from the attack on the Order, and he stopped Healer Revan from moving in to join them. “There’s so many healers here,” Harry asked, “who’s left to tend to the wounded in the main hall?”

Revan blinked in confusion before replying. “I think a half-dozen healers are handling the injured. We figured that taking care of a great mage like Albus Dumbledore would be much more important, since he’s a more valuable asset to the fight against Voldemort.”

Harry frowned. “A half-dozen? There must be thirty healers and nurses in here! Get them back to work on the injured in the grand hall, right now.”

“But milord-“

“Dumbledore is stable, right?”

“Well, yes-“

“Then get them back to work!” Harry yelled.

“But-“

Harry lost control of his already frayed temper and grabbed the healer by the front of his robes. “Listen to me carefully. In fact, all of you listen carefully,” he said loudly. “No one, I repeat, no one is more important than anyone else in this fight. Every single person is important, because if we begin to believe some are better than others, we’re exactly where Voldemort is right now. Now get the hell back to the grand hall and take care of the injured like you swore you did when you took your healer’s oath!”

The effect was immediate. The nurses and healers scattered and hurried out of the room, trying to get away from the irritated Lord Polairix. Revan himself took a step back, only to realize that Harry was still holding on to the front of his robes.

“Milord...” the healer began.

Harry didn’t let go, taking deep, shuddering breaths until a woman’s hand gently pried loose the fingers he’d clenched in the fabric of Revan’s robes. “Shh. It’s all right, Harry.” Bella muttered into his ear.

“Bella?”

“I heard you yelling from the other side of the castle,” the black-haired witch smirked.

“We were busy coordinating the strike teams at the Ministry with General Rotan and Shacklebolt with the new information Moody provided. I came as soon as I heard they’d brought in Dumbledore.”

“Well, turns out he isn’t quite dead, after all,” Harry sighed heavily.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Hermione asked from the sidelines.

Harry shrugged. “I hope so. I mean, I’m not particularly fond of him, but he’s fighting for the right cause. And as much as I hate to admit it, we need his help. And he’s the figurehead of the ‘light,’ so if we lost him...”

“Bad things would happen,” Hermione agreed. “It’s bad enough that he’s in a coma and close to death. Voldemort must’ve done quite a number on him.”

“Yeah, but he went down fighting. The room they duelled in was all but destroyed, torn down to the foundation, despite all the magical wards and supports in Number 12, Grimmauld.”

“Uh...milord?” Revan made himself known again. The three turned towards the ice healer.

“Oh, right, the old man,” Harry realized. “So, what’s the state he’s in?”

“Like I said before, milord, he’s stable for now, and unconscious, much like a comatose state. The injuries he suffered are numerous, and mostly magical in nature. He is leaking magical energy slowly, and nothing we’ve tried so far has worked to stop it,” Revan explained.

“So what happens if it keeps going?”

“He will eventually die. It’s much like a slow wound that bleeds out and festers. When wizards loose their magical energy without being able to replenish it, it has much the same effect as bleeding out.” Revan sighed. “It must have been caused by a very complex combination of dark curses, because even the most powerful healing potions and spells we have tried have had no effect. In fact, a wound like this is very rare. We have very little experience in it.”

“How long does he have?” Bella asked, staring down at the old wizard, an unreadable expression on her face.

“Hard to say.” Revan shrugged helplessly. “If he were anyone else, anyone less powerful, he would’ve been dead almost immediately. As it is, he’s somehow managed to slow down his vital functions enough that the leak has slowed down, as well. At the current rate, maybe two days. Three at most. It’s really hard to tell.”

“And there’s nothing you can do?”

“Not at this stage, milady. I’m the only one out of the healers here who has seen such a condition before, and only once.”

Harry turned around to stare at the healer grimly. “What happened to that patient?”

"He died wthin three hours."

"Any chance he's going to wake up before then?" Harry and Bella shared a quick glance. They both realized that Dumbledore had been their best shot at trying to figure out how to break through the ward surrounding the Rod of Dominion. "I'll get on it immediately," Bella told him.

"Take Hermione with you, she'll be able to help you," Harry added. The two women nodded and left the room, leaving Harry and Revan alone with Dumbledore's still body. Revan muttered a quick diagnostics spell before excusing himself to go look after the other injured, which left Harry alone in the room.

The young lord of Polairix stared down at Dumbledore for several long moments, trying to sort through his thoughts. "I'd love to say you got what you deserved, Dumbledore. After all you've done to me, you certainly do. But like I told Hermione, I can't afford to get angry right now. If I get angry at you, I'd have to be angry at the whole damn wizarding world. Sure, you made my life a living hell by condemning me to Azkaban, but you were only the catalyst. The entirety of the wizarding world was the one who collectively turned their backs on me. You...you just made things worse by starting them off. And what's worse, we need your help, now more than ever."

Harry glanced at Dumbledore's wand that the recovery teams had found and placed on a table next to the ancient headmaster's bed. "You know what? That's a lie. I'm angry. I'm so very angry, I almost wish you'd die. I'm so angry I almost let Voldemort have a go at the wizarding world, and this time you wouldn't be able to stop him. I'm tired, Dumbledore. I'm sick and tired of playing the hero, of playing the incorruptible saint that I have to be, because everything I do, every decision I make, is debated, scrutinized, and criticized by people who haven't a clue on how to do a better job. And you know what? I'm sick of it. I'm only human. They expect that they can treat me like trash whenever they feel like it and I'll still come to the rescue. I have my limits, Dumbledore. Like every freakin' human being on this planet, I have my limit. And you almost crossed the line. In fact, for a

time, you did. I swear, if it hadn't been for Bella, I would've turned my back on the wizarding world."

The young wizard let out a bitter laugh. "You know what's sad?" Dumbledore naturally didn't reply, but Harry continued anyway. "What's sad is that Bella, someone I thought I'd sell my soul to get a chance to kill, is the one who redeemed me. And you know how that happened? Because she showed me that despite almost overwhelming evil, despite whatever she'd done in her past, she'd found her way back to doing what's right. After everything she did, all the people who hated her...she still found the strength to turn around and say, 'the hell with Voldemort, it's time I did what's right.' And you know what? I don't think these people deserve what we're doing for them. They're letting others fight their war for them, good men and women who're dying and getting no recognition from the wizarding world whatsoever. I truly believe the wizarding world would be better off dying out than continuing on its self-centered egotistical path it's on, but I'm trying to do what's right. I'm trying..." Harry trailed off as he wiped at the tears leaking from his eyes angrily.

"You have no idea how close you came to being utterly annihilated, Dumbledore. I'm sick and tired of pulling the wizarding world's ass out of the fire and getting this...this crap in return every time. Every year! First year I was lauded a hero. Second year I was the menace, the heir to Slytherin. Third year I was back to being a hero who needed to be protected from his godfather, whom no one had bothered to check with veritaserum! Fourth year..." Harry chuckled mirthlessly. "Fourth year, I was the insane kid with an attention-seeking complex. Did you know the things Umbridge did to us? She made us write lines with a blood quill. A blood quill! These things are considered illegal dark artifacts! And don't even get me started on the rest of my fifth year – that whole mess could've been avoided, and Sirius would still be alive, if you'd goddamn trusted me! But no, I always was the little kid to you, someone who you had to protect, despite the fact that I always ended up doing your dirty work for you! You kept so many things from me, ignored what I tried to tell you so many times. You'd figure after everything I've been through, after everything I've faced, I'd earned just a little respect!"

Harry slowed down, taking deep breaths to calm down. “And then this! First Sirius, and then me. It seems you never check people with Vritaserum these days, despite the fact that that’s exactly what it’s for. And I didn’t even get a chance to properly defend myself, unless you call those three words I could say before Fudge cut me off a defense! I’m sensing a pattern here, you know,” he spat bitterly to the face of the unresponsive headmaster.

“The wizarding world needs a wake-up call. It needs to figure out that it can’t continue with its xenophobic, self-centered ways, because if it does, it will eventually end up with more enemies than just Voldemort. And you know what’s worse? Tom Riddle is your fault! That’s what you tell everyone, but you’re just making an excuse for the wizarding world. Sure, you ignored him and kept sending him back to the orphanage over the summer, despite him telling you not to, but in the end, Tom Riddle was a product of his environment. You’re surprised why Voldemort turned out the way he did? Be more surprised I didn’t turn out the way he did, with the way the world keeps changing its opinion of me on the drop of a hat! I’m sick of it, Dumbledore, so damn sick of it. But I can’t go around and say ‘this better be worth it,’ because I know it won’t be. The wizarding world will just continue on the way it’s been, and all this will have been for nothing. It’ll keep going until one day, there won’t be anyone to save it, and that’s the day the wizarding world is going to die.”

His tirade done, Harry turned around to leave the room, only stopping to say a few last words. “But you know what? Whenever the wizarding world is going to end, it won’t be now. Because I’ll do everything in my power to stop Voldemort. Not for you, not for Hermione. Not because it’s the right thing to do. No, I’m doing it for myself. For my parents. For Sirius. For all the friends and family Voldemort has taken from me. Just goddamn once, just this once, I’m going to be selfish. And if the wizarding world doesn’t like it, well, tough luck.” Harry took a deep breath. “This one’s for me, old man. For me, and Bella, and our child. I know Voldemort outguns me. He’s got way more experience, and logically, I should roll over and die. But you know what? The hell with him. The hell with you. I’ll do whatever’s in my power to stop him, and I’ll laugh at the irony that you have Bella to thank for that.”

He was about to leave when a sound caught his attention. With a roar of flame, Fawkes appeared in the center of the room within a sheath of fire, accompanied by notes of Phoenix song. Green eyes widened in surprise, since Harry hadn't seen Fawkes in years, yet now the bird was there, soaring across the room, before finally settling on the table next to Dumbledore's bed. The Phoenix cocked its head to the side as it stared at Harry intently with its black eyes, before trilling and leaping over to settle on Harry's shoulder. Fawkes nipped at Harry's ear and trilled happily, as if greeting an old friend, and Harry found himself stroking the bird's magnificent feathers.

"Hey, Fawkes," Harry managed once the surprise had faded. The bird sang in reply, and Harry found the depression and irrational anger fade. Fawkes peered into his eyes, and he could see understanding in the Phoenix's gaze, almost as if he'd listened to Harry's tirade and was telling him that it was all right. Fawkes sang for a few more moments, before settling down on Dumbledore's chest and shedding a few tears. The bird made itself comfortable, and began singing again, a different song this time, one that changed Harry's awareness of the room. He could almost feel the intangible magic in the castle, the indeterminable lines of power that permeated the walls and halls of the fortress that converged on him, the master of Nair'i'caix. And then he suddenly became aware of the energy flowing out of Dumbledore. And just as quickly, it slowly stopped, then reversed direction.

The whole song lasted only seconds, but to Harry, it felt almost like an eternity, and when it ended, he was snapped back to reality so suddenly he almost thought he'd imagined the whole experience, but Fawke's presence confirmed that it'd been real. He was confused as to what it meant, but considering the Phoenix's incredible healing abilities, he wouldn't put it past Fawkes to be able to heal Dumbledore.

"Harry!" Bella's voice came down the corridor, causing him to divert his attention from the Phoenix. The urgency in his wife's tone coupled with the fact that she'd just left caused a sinking feeling in Harry's gut – something he was rapidly becoming intimately familiar with.

The dark-haired witch came barreling around the corner and down into the room, barely sparing Fawkes a second glance, before tugging on Harry's sleeves. "We've got a problem, Harry. Someone tried to kill the Weasley twins right under all our noses."

The young lord of Polairix's eyes widened in shocked surprise. "What? What happened?"

"We're not sure, come on, we just found them in the library."

Harry gestured for Bella to lead the way and followed, only to stop and glance back at Fawkes. "Sorry, I've got to go." The bird looked up in understanding, and flew up to perch himself in the rafters, as if telling Harry that he'd still be there when he got back. Turning back to his wife, Harry rushed after Bella as she led him to the library, passing a number of healers and soldiers on the way. He ignored most of them until they reached the library, and skidded to a halt at the sight that presented itself to him.

Fred and George were stretched out on the ground, apparently having moved from wherever they'd been found so that the swarm of healers and nurses that were working on them could have an easier time. It wasn't too hard to figure out where the twins had been found, because two large puddles of blood stained the wooden floor halfway across the room, and Harry almost gagged at the sheer amount of blood that had half-dried on the ground.

Pushing their way through the throng of people working on the twins, Harry managed to get a good look at them before stepping back to allow a nurse to move in and place a bandage on George's head. Aside from the nasty headwound the nurse was in the process of dressing – a long gash that went well around from his forehead across his temple – George had a number of stab wounds that had mostly been mended, and that now were only indicated by holes in his shirt.

Fred was by far worse off than his brother. Where George's wounds were relatively easily healed by potions and skin-mending spells, Fred's skin was looking brittle and was discolored a sickly yellow, as a thick, ichory liquid oozed from breaks in the skin all over his arms

and legs. Dark spots like bruises were visible on his exposed torso, and his left hand was completely missing up to halfway up his forearm. Harry felt positively sick when he saw the missing appendage sitting on a nearby table, with a nurse next to it, probably to keep it in good condition so that it could eventually be re-attached.

Then the smell hit him. The coppery scent of blood he was familiar with, but the stench coming off the pus leaking out of Fred's skin was worse than anything he'd ever smelled, including the smell of burning flesh Harry had experienced not an hour ago. He turned around and threw up, retching and heaving as his stomach protested. A few moments later, he could feel Bella's soothing hand on his back as she steadied him. She muttered a quick cleaning spell, causing the mess on the ground to vanish.

"Thanks," Harry muttered weakly.

"You're welcome." Bella managed a small smile as she turned him around and walked him out of the room. "Sorry, I should've warned you."

"It's all right. What...what the hell happened?"

"When Hermione and I left, we went to the library to keep looking for ways to break that ward. We found them like that, and called the medics. We have no idea who or what did this, but we've got more bad news while we're at it." Bella's expression turned grim.

"What is it?"

"Ginny went missing."

Chapter 43

By: Claihmsolais

"You're kidding me. Ginny's the traitor?" Moody barked as Harry told the assembled war council the conclusion he'd come to.

"Not necessarily," Harry countered. "We don't really know at the moment, but it doesn't look good. Ginny's gone to Merlin knows where, and since she was last seen with Fred and George, we can assume that whoever took her attacked the twins."

"Or maybe she was the one who attacked the twins."

Hermione shook her head at Moody's conclusion. "I doubt it. Ginny would never betray us like that."

"Just like she wouldn't betray Potter here?"

"That's enough, both of you!" Harry shouted as Hermione was about to reply to the old auror's accusation. He frowned, unable to shake the doubts Moody's words had raised, but now was not the time to be tearing each other apart over accusations that were impossible to prove. Ginny was gone, her wand with her, and Fred and George were in critical condition. Harry glanced around the table. General Rotan and Count Hiscophney were absent, having left immediately after the rescue operation. With the accelerated schedule, both of them were now in the process of arraying their troops at the Ministry along with Kinglsey Shacklebolt, who was in charge of the auror forces. Neville and Luna had left to inform the Legion of the recent developments and prepare the students for the battle to come – a battle that, Harry fervently hoped, the students would never see.

That left Bella, Hermione, Moody, Snape, Remus, and Queen Xerina around the table, along with an elderly witch that was the representative for the Order members that were well enough to fight. Harry had initially been reluctant to let her be part of their planning session, but both Snape and Moody had agreed that it would help build trust that was, at the moment, sorely lacking. Tonks was also

nowhere to be found, something that they'd just realized when they'd called the meeting. With the Order's command structure in shambles thanks to Voldemort's ambush, no one really knew what to do, and members were running around without specific objectives.

Harry frowned. Tonks's absence was something else they'd have to deal with. Taking a deep breath and returning his attention to the table, he continued. "Right now, the identity of the traitor is not important." He raised a hand to forestall comments from both Moody and the Order witch. "Listen. Whoever the traitor was, he or she is gone. That I'm sure of."

"How would you know? You're just a kid! Because of you and your friends here, we're in this situation to begin with!" The witch at the other end of the table spat angrily. "Without you, we wouldn't even be in this position, and now you're telling us the traitor's not a big deal? You're nothing more than an arrogant brat!"

"Silence!" Snape thundered before Harry could even open his mouth to retort, surprising everyone at the table. The raven-haired potions master turned on the witch, visibly angry. The sight caused most of the people there to cringe back. "Madame Arretha, with all due respect, shut up. You know nothing. You—"

"Why, I've never been spoken to like that! And who are you to lecture me, Severus Snape!"

"And what is that supposed to mean?" Snape shot back in a dangerously low tone.

The woman sniffed haughtily. "It's obvious, isn't it? You're the headmaster's lapdog. The only reason you're part of the Order is because of Albus Dumbledore. Without him, we'd never have let you be a part of the Order, and a lot of us thought – still think – that Dumbledore made a mistake, letting someone who was so close to the dark lord be a part of a movement against him."

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

“How do we know you weren’t the traitor? How do we know you’re not a double-agent for He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named? The temptation of the dark arts is strong, I’m sure. And you always were one to seek power, weren’t you, Severus?” she spat the name with enough venom to make everyone at the table flinch. Snape, however, looked unperturbed.

“And this...this boy,” Madame Arretha gestured towards Harry dismissingly. “He should be in Azkaban, along with her,” she pointed at Bella. “Truly, they’re a pair well matched, a crazy, attention-seeking brat and the insane dark witch. People like them should be put down, before he becomes the next dark lord! Without him, we’d all be better off, and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named would still be dead!”

“Are you daft, woman?” Moody growled, unable to restrain himself. “Are you really that stupid? Do you have any idea what you’re talking about?”

“Of course!” she turned to Moody. “Don’t tell me you buy their act? They’re just doing this for their own personal gain, and when He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is gone again, and we’re weakened from the conflict, they’ll step in and he’ll become the next Dark lord!”

Both Snape and Moody were about to reply when Harry slammed his palms onto the table. Every eye around the table suddenly focused on the young man who was practically trembling with restrained fury, and to both Bella and Snape, who could sense magic flows, he looked lit up like a Christmas tree as he seethed with anger. “That is enough, from all of you,” Harry hissed.

“I don’t take orders from you . . .” Madame Arretha began.

“Shut up.” The order echoed throughout the room, amplified by the castle’s magic as it sensed its master’s anger. It instantly shut up the witch, who flinched as Harry looked at her. “You’re a fool. You’re all fools. Do you have any idea what we have sacrificed for people like you? Do you? You think I’m the source of all of your problems?” Harry laughed bitterly. “Try placing the blame a bit closer to home! Tom Riddle became Lord Voldemort because he was disgusted with

the state of affairs in the wizarding world, and you know what the sad thing is? He's right!"

"Harry . . ." Hermione began, only to back away, scared at the intense look in her friend's green eyes.

"The wizarding world is a collection of, racist, close-minded people who are so focused on themselves that they fail to see anything but their own comfort! You think I made things worse? Who would've stopped Quirrel when he attempted to steal the Philosopher's Stone for Voldemort, hmm? Who would've stopped the memory of Tom Riddle from unleashing the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets? Who would've prepared the students for Voldemort's return, who was the one Dumbledore pushed into fulfilling some stupid prophecy? Tell me! Tell me!" Harry yelled at the witch.

"You won't take that tone with me . . ."

"I'll tell you. No one would've stopped him. No one. Because none of you wanted to stand up to him! Hell, you didn't even want to believe he was back, even with the evidence slapping you right in the face! No, you were so concerned with what was convenient for you that you didn't want to look out from your little dream world. I'll tell you what would've happened. I'll show you a world without Harry Potter." Harry started counting off his fingers. "First year, Quirrel would've gotten the stone. He would've brought back Voldemort, and with the Elixir of Life, he would've been virtually immortal. And then what? Simple really, you would've been screwed. Second year, Voldemort lets loose the basilisk. Who here wants to tackle a basilisk, hmm? Given the fact that no one's even seen one in 900 years, I don't see too many of you too eager to tackle one! You know what? Every scenario, every time I stopped Voldemort...what would've happened if I hadn't been there? You would've been screwed big time!"

Madame Arretha snorted disdainfully. "Now you're just full of yourself. Your fame goes to your head, Potter. You overestimate your value."

"Oh, I don't think so, but that doesn't matter. You don't matter. In fact, you're here merely out of courtesy, but I see that it was

misplaced. If you insist on showing me and my allies nothing but disrespect, then we have nothing more to discuss. We have fought this war without your help, and we'll continue to do so. Leave the room."

"And let you and your merry band of fools foul up the future of the wizarding world? I don't think so!"

"Leave, before I have you removed."

"I'd like to see you try, boy. You're about fifty years too young to be a challenge," Arretha drew her wand.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry's ivory wand was in his hand and out before the witch could react, and the disarming spell hit her full-force, causing her wand to go flying and the witch to tumble backwards to the floor. "I said, leave. Get out. Now!" Harry bellowed, picking up her wand and throwing it after her as she hurried out the door.

He took a few deep breaths, then realized that everyone else in the room was still staring at him. "What?" he asked as he turned around, somewhat calmer now. Damn, he thought, but that felt good.

"Nothing...nothing," Hermione muttered, even as Moody grinned. Even Snape seemed to lighten up a little bit at the Order witch's hasty exit. Remus was openly chuckling.

"Prongs and Sirius would've been proud," the werewolf noted with a smirk.

"Now...who knows where Tonks is? It's not like her to suddenly take off without letting anyone know," Harry asked.

Moody grumbled in dissatisfaction. "That's just the thing, Potter, lately she's been doing that a lot. On Dumbledore's orders, mostly. No one knows where she goes or what she's doing on her secret missions for him, and she never has any backup."

“What worries me is the timing of events,” Bella said. “I mean, the attack on the twins happens, and then one of our allies goes missing at the same time. That sounds like more than coincidence to me.”

“What’s more,” Hermione added, “is that a large number of our reference texts on wards and blood magic went missing. We were looking into them in the library in the hopes of being able to break the ward around the Rod, but they’re gone.”

“That’s why I would assume you’re right, Harry, and that the traitor really is gone. Now is the perfect timing for them to strike, and if they manage to bring back any information on the Rod to Voldemort...” Remus trailed off at the horrifying thought.

“We’re screwed,” Harry finished grimly.

“So what can we do?”

Hermione glanced over at Moody and answered the old auror’s question. “Nothing. We have no intelligence on Voldemort’s whereabouts, and until Fred or George wake up, we have no leads on the traitor. Assuming Ginny’s disappearance is related, we don’t know where to look for her, either.”

“What about Tonks? The Order must have some way to track its members, or some sort of communications device,” Harry offered.

Remus shook his head. “No, we don’t. Security purposes.”

“It’d be too easy to reverse the tracking charm or the communications charm and backtrack to every single item that’s linked. If we lost one to Voldemort’s forces, the entire Order would be compromised,” Moody added gravely.

“So we can only hope she’ll show up again?”

“I’m afraid so, Potter.”

Harry sighed in frustration. “Damn that old man. All right, let’s get down to other business. Count Hiscophney and General Rotan are taking care of deploying our troops. By tomorrow, all four thousand should be in position, with all the fortifications in place. Voldemort attacks the day after that.”

“Are we sure Voldemort is going to stick to the time he gave you?” Bella asked, “He’s insane and unpredictable at times. He might actually attack earlier.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t think so. That message was written in blood, and directed at me, not Dumbledore. The Order was just supposed to be the messenger. Voldemort wants me to know that he knows what I’m up to, and that he’s walking into this trap fully intending to destroy us all. His ego demands nothing less. He’ll be there the day after tomorrow.”

“Potter’s right,” Snape agreed. “The Dark lord may be many things, but he will not attempt any deception on something of this importance. That’d be more the kind of trickery Lucius Malfoy would attempt. Since he’s dead...”

“Then what about the attack on the Order? That’d constitute a premature attack, wouldn’t it?” Hermione asked.

Moody’s magical eye swiveled in annoyance. “No, not in his opinion. The battle he will fight in two days is with Potter, not with the Order, not with the wizarding world. As much as I hate to say it, the Order is inconsequential. The few hundred old witches and wizards in the Order would not make much of a difference with the number of professionally trained battle mages and soldiers there. Besides,” he snorted, “I think he wanted to get the Order out of Potter’s way.”

“What?” Harry blinked in surprise.

“The Dark lord sees the Order as an annoyance, at best,” Moody continued, pausing only when Remus looked like he wanted to interrupt. “Face it, Lupin, the Order is far from the height of its strength. Much like the wizarding world, the Order of the Phoenix is

long past its heyday, and in this conflict, we've not made much of a difference when it comes to taking the fight to Voldemort during the war."

"So, what did you mean by Voldemort wanting to get the Order out of my way?"

"Simple. Somewhere deep down in his twisted mind, the Dark lord adheres to some kind of perverse sense of honor. The battle you challenged him to was between you and him. He knows that the Order sees you as their enemy, and that most Order members at the very least dislike you."

"No thanks to Voldemort," Harry muttered darkly.

Moody chuckled. "There is that. I think that's why he feels some kind of twisted sense of obligation to make sure the Order won't interfere any further, so that you and he can have a 'clean' fight."

"It's absolutely crazy, but it makes sense. In a twisted kind of way," Hermione admitted.

Bella and Snape shared a quick glance, and both nodded in agreement. Having known the Dark wizard and seen his actions up close and personal, they realized that was just the twisted kind of thing he would do. "It also helped that he just managed to eliminate whatever little opposition the Order would've been," Bella noted.

"The timing couldn't have been better. Dumbledore was losing support among the population with the increased attacks. He probably saw a chance to take out the headmaster. I'm sure that was a big part of the reason," Snape argued in support.

"All right," Harry sighed. "That leaves us with just one task until the battle. We need to find a way of getting to that Rod. Preferably before Voldemort does."

"I'll send another contingent to Azkaban to guard the fortress against any possible intrusions," Queen Xerina spoke up for the first time since the meeting had begun.

"No," Harry shook his head. "If Voldemort is going after the Rod, then he's going to be doing it in force, and personally. If I were him, I wouldn't leave a weapon that could tear my soul to pieces lying around. Plus, the traitor may have told him about the prophecy, that he who holds the Rod would dictate his fate. If he is the one holding the Rod, you can bet that future's going to be rather rosy for him."

"All the more reason to increase security . . ."

"No. In fact, pull as many soldiers from there as you can. Put up wards, alarms, automated defenses, but leave only a skeleton crew there. When Voldemort comes, I want there to be as few casualties as possible."

"But shouldn't we try to delay him as much as we can? We cannot allow him to get to the Rod, and every single soldier there is willing to die to prevent that, if you give the order."

"No. Pull them off," Harry ordered sternly. "None of them will be a match for Voldemort. Besides, the Rod is still protected by that ward. When Voldemort comes, I'll fight him. I just hope that he won't come before the battle. Now, our main priority should be figuring out if we can get to the Rod."

"Lord Polairix," General Rotan greeted Harry as he and his party stepped out of the fireplace at the atrium of the Ministry on the day Voldemort had announced that he would attack. Arrayed around the hall were soldiers, all of them standing at attention, with Trazkabanian sorcerers interspersed between them.

"General. Count Hiscophney," Harry returned the greeting at his two commanders. Behind him, Snape, Remus, and Moody moved to flank the young Earl of the North. Bella had remained at the fortress, under

heavy guard, due to her pregnancy, along with Hermione. The brunette had argued long and loud with Harry to be a part of this battle, but he had stubbornly refused to give in, then ordered her locked in her room with two guards in front of her door, and another half-dozen guards at the fireplaces to prevent her from slipping out to join the fighting later on.

The six of them walked up to the elevators that took them to the Minister's office. Bert Mockridge was waiting for them when they got there, and greeted Harry warmly, despite the suspicious glares from the aurors stationed around the room. "Sorry for them, but they insisted that my security couldn't be trusted to anyone but them," Mockridge shrugged.

"Personally, I can't really agree, but what do I know. I'm just a politician."

Harry chuckled and waved off the aurors, who bristled at being dismissed by a teenager. "Oh, don't worry about it. I'll have some people put outside your door. Voldemort won't even get close to you. I'll make sure of that."

"We should make sure those two kill each other," one of the aurors muttered, only to find himself facing a fistful of crackling energy, courtesy of Count Hiscophney.

"I dare you to say that again," the Count hissed. When the auror gulped nervously and remained silent, the sorcerer withdrew, satisfied for now.

Harry and Mockridge watched the exchange with thinly veiled amusement. "It might be a long wait, Bert. We don't know when Voldemort is planning to attack, just that it'll be today, so we'll have to be on guard all day."

"All right. I just wish there was something more we could do to help." Mockridge sighed. "I don't feel right leaving you to face the dark lord alone."

"I've faced him before, Bert. Four times, and I've walked away four times. My track record against him is pretty good, and I don't intend to start changing that now," Harry said with a smirk that hid his nervousness. In the two days between then and now, they had not been able to break the ward. The Rod of Dominion still sat in its resting place, hovering behind an impenetrable ward deep beneath the fortress of Azkaban. At least Voldemort hadn't made a move to take it yet, which gave Harry some semblance of hope. He clenched his hand around the handle of his ivory wand. He would just have to rely on the training Bella, Snape, Remus, and Moody had put him through when they had realized they would be unable to break the ward.

"That's good. Good." Mockridge licked his dry lips. "We owe you a great debt, Harry Potter, one we'll never be able to repay. Whatever happens today, I'll make sure the wizarding world will never forget you."

"You're assuming you'll survive, Bert," Harry chuckled.

Mockridge smiled softly. "With you taking on the Dark lord? Harry, I have absolutely no doubt that you will succeed. I pray for you and your people, and your safe return. You already accomplished so much, but there's still more you could do. So much that the wizarding world could learn from you, about taking responsibility, about courage...so don't you die, today, Harry Potter. My blessings with you."

Harry looked up, touched by the older man's words. "I – thank you." He was about to say more, when an explosion rocked the building. Harry's green eyes met with Hiscophney's as the Count stepped back from the window and nodded.

Voldemort was here.

Chapter 44

By: Claihmsolais

The battle was already raging when Harry and his group arrived back in the atrium. So far, Voldemort's troops hadn't managed to get past the defenders at the front gates, and when Harry stepped through the huge double doors that marked the entrance to the Ministry, he could see why. Rotan and Hiscophney had skillfully arrayed their troops, forcing Voldemort's army to fight an uphill battle as they climbed up the large stairwell that led to the building's front entrance, all the while taking fire from all sides.

Giants were leading the charge, using their large bodies and insane constitution to shrug off the curses and hexes the defenders were hurling at them and shelter the humans, vampires, and werewolves behind them from the brunt of the spellfire. An ice soldier arrived, giving Rotan a brief salute. "The primary barriers outside are holding, but Voldemort's mages have begun breaking down the wards that the sorcerers have put up. It will take them some time, but they are making progress. The southern flank is coming under heavy attack, and I was just about to send a company to reinforce them."

"Go ahead," Rotan nodded, glancing out at the battlefield. So far, the two frontlines were still well-drawn, and the defenders were at an advantage, hidden behind barriers and covered from enemy attacks as they were. However, a look over the totality of Voldemort's forces caused a shiver of fear to run down the aging general's spine.

The dark wizard had brought to bear innumerable troops, ranging from hundreds of giants that were able to just walk through whatever wards they had erected, to hordes of werewolves and vampires. Thousands of the dark creatures were spread out before the Ministry, and when a roar came from overhead, they looked up to see the sky darken as the sun was blocked out. Harry's blood ran cold as he recognized the familiar cold spreading through him, amplified by a thousand times as enough Dementors flew overhead to block out the sky.

"What the . . ." Harry stared in disbelief as the Dementors snarled angrily at the wards.

"What in the name of the Queen is going on here?" Rotan asked. "I thought these vile creatures were bound to the will of Lord Polairix!"

"They were...are," Harry gulped. "I went to Azkaban to check on Captain Nailoff and our defenses there just yesterday. The Dementors are still there."

"Then where did these come from? And in such numbers?" Rotan muttered, his throat dry. Giants, dark wizards, werewolves and vampires the aging general could handle. They were vulnerable to conventional weapons, and the Ice people had brought weapons that would decimate their ranks. Creatures that were impervious to anything but magic, on the other hand, were a different matter...and not just any magic, a specific brand of white magic, no less. That was something they weren't prepared to face, and certainly not in the thousands.

Hiscophney narrowed his eyes as he looked up in the sky. "Which books did you say were missing from the library?"

"Just our research on wards, and extra-planar magic," Harry replied, confused.

"Extra-planar magic, eh?" Hiscophney turned to look at Rotan and Harry. "Voldemort found a way to access another plane. He summoned these."

"What?" Harry cried in disbelief. He hated Dementors. Sure, he'd gotten used to the ones at Azkaban, but he had never fully gotten over his dislike of the creatures. They were something so vile, so dark, so...unnatural that he couldn't help but feel they weren't native to this world. He had less problems with giant spiders and basilisks roaming the field. Speaking of basilisks...

"What on Earth is that?" a soldier quailed, pointing out into the distance, where a giant snake was rearing its head.

"Dear Lord, he brought a basilisk?" a second soldier muttered.

"So you're saying Voldemort went through the missing books that the traitor took, figured out how the ancestral Lords of Polairix managed to open a portal to another plane, and summoned what, a thousand Dementors?"

Hiscophney nodded at Rotan's assessment. "That would be correct. There is no other explanation. Dementors are not native to this plane; that much I know. There should only be a hundred or so in existence, stationed at Azkaban, all of them bound by blood magic to obey Lord Polairix. Therefore, we have to conclude that these have arrived on this plane just recently. There can be no other explanation for the sudden appearance of this many of these creatures."

Harry suppressed a shudder. He knew Voldemort was powerful, but even Bella and Hermione had never suspected anything like this to be possible. The possibility of opening a portal to another plane and summoning creatures had certainly never come up in any of their discussions. For him to be able to achieve this after just two days . . . the prospect scared Harry even more than the looming army of darkness. And he somehow had managed to transform Nagini into a giant snake, and the dark lord's pet seemed content to destroy anything in its path, crushing defenders and attackers alike under its fifty-foot long body. His blood ran cold. Any kind of plans they had made hadn't factored in Dementors, much less a thousand of them. They were virtually helpless against the soul-sucking creatures.

The Dementors were still kept at bay by the magical wards the Trazkabanian sorcerers had put up, but once those fell to Voldemort's spellbreakers, the Dementors would be free to roam their battle lines. As it was, their proximity and sheer number was enough to seriously affect everyone on the field. Harry grimly estimated the number of enemy troops at more than ten thousand. They were outnumbered almost three to one.

“Shacklebolt!” Harry shouted as the Dementors continued bouncing against the wards above them. The auror shouted back from his position on the north end of the stairs.

“We’re a bit busy here, Harry!”

“Pull back all the aurors and have them do a Patronus! We need to keep those Dementors away from us!” Harry ordered, leaving unsaid that once the wards failed, the Patronus charm would be the only thing standing between the defenders and a very quick death.

“Got it!” Shacklebolt belted out a few orders from his location, before retreating to stand with Harry, surrounded by a cadre of witches and wizards from the Auror department and the Order of the Phoenix. Harry’s heart skipped a beat and he ruthlessly suppressed his anger when he saw Ron Weasley among them. Rotan and Hiscophney both left to take their command posts at the center and southern flanks, ordering the wizards they found along the way to fall back and conjure up the Patronus.

“I’ve got most of the wizards pull back behind the soldiers and sorcerers,” Shacklebolt told Harry, “they’ll be staying at a safe distance and will be throwing up the Patronus on your signal. These are the only ones I can spare to protect the inner defensive lines, I’m afraid.”

Harry nodded in acknowledgement, then looked over the twenty-two wizards and witches the auror had brought with him. “All right, spread out and find some cover. I’m warning you right now that the front lines will most likely collapse soon, so find a place that’s safe in case that happens. Your job will be to keep up the Patronus for as long as you can. When the wards come down, and they will, you’re the only thing standing between our forces and those Dementors, so pull yourself together and cast the most goddamn powerful Patronus you’ve ever cast in your lives!”

Ron bristled at the commanding tone in his former friend’s tone. “I don’t take orders from you, traitor!”

“Weasley!” Shacklebolt shouted. “We don’t have time to argue, now take your damn orders and comply!”

“No! Why the bloody hell is he even in charge? Are you so stupid you can’t see he’s just playing you? He’s going to get us all bloody killed!”

Before Shacklebolt could answer, Harry reached out and slapped Ron across the face. The action stunned not only the redhead, but all the mages around them. Ron began to raise his wand, only to find himself held at wandpoint. Surprisingly, it wasn’t Harry’s wand he was staring down at, but Shacklebolt’s. The senior auror trembled with restrained fury as explosions shook the building around them.

“This is not the time or the place for your childish behavior, Mr. Weasley. You volunteered to help defend the Ministry against Voldemort’s attack, which means you are under my command. Since I follow Lord Polairix’s orders and battle plans, that means you damn well will, too – now get the hell going before I toss you back into a fireplace to the Burrow!”

“If you’re listening to what he’s saying, then you’re as much a traitor as he is!” Ron fired back. “This whole plan is insanity, he’s just doing this so we all kill each other!” The surrounding witches and wizards were shifting uncomfortably, and Shacklebolt realized that was their fear, too. The auror suppressed an annoyed groan; this was the last thing they needed in this battle, but Voldemort had done too good a job at ruining Harry’s image in the public, even with the revelation that he was innocent.

“Get down!” Harry yelled as he dove to the ground, taking two witches down with him. A fireball the size of a hippogriff exploded above them, tearing a giant hole into the building above. Harry’s eyes widened as he tracked the quaffle-sized pieces of debris raining down on top of them. Without a second thought, he rolled over, his ivory wand out in his hand.

“Orbis Custodia!” The overpowered shield spell expanded outwards from him until it formed a dome fifty feet in diameter, covering all of

the cowering witches and wizards as chunks of marble bounced off it. Harry let the spell fade away as the last of the rubble had crashed to the ground and stood a bit shakily. Adrenalin had caused him to push far more energy into the shield spell than it was supposed to handle, and it had drained him somewhat.

An unearthly screech filled the air, and his blood ran cold as he felt the protective wards surrounding the Ministry come down, sooner than he'd expected. A hasty glance up into the sky confirmed his fears as Dementors swept down on the defenders' lines, now unhindered by wards. Forgetting the exhaustion caused by the shield spell, Harry pointed his wand upwards and towards the forward battle lines.

"Expecto—" he faltered as the proximity to the Dementors caused him to almost black out, and he wobbled precariously for a few seconds, until he managed to put up the mental defenses that Occlumency provided him with. "Expecto Patronum!" he roared, putting every ounce of his strength, every happy memory of Bella, every feeling of joy at becoming a father, behind it, because if they failed in holding back the Dementors now, then the whole battle was lost.

Instead of the familiar stag erupting from the tip of his wand, a beam of blinding white light speared up into the sky as the spell was amplified by the wand into its most powerful, most primal incarnation, causing the Dementors to swerve to evade it desperately. The one that got clipped by the beam opened its mouth in silent agony before it disintegrated. Seeing his signal, Patronus charms sprung up all across the front lines, the white glow of happy thoughts halting the Dementors' crushing advance. A hundred yards in the air, Harry's beam spread, splitting open like a flower blossom as it arched around, his mind molding the spell into a shield that would protect the people around him.

"What are you waiting for? Cast, dammit!" Shacklebolt swore as the aurors he stood with did nothing, either shocked by the immense power displayed by the young heir of Polairix, or stubbornly refusing to follow orders like Ron. Seeing the strain on Harry as the

Dementors bounced up against his shield, Shacklebolt put up his own Patronus in the hopes of helping alleviate the strain on him a little bit.

It didn't take the Dementors long to find out where the most powerful spell was coming from, and whether it was their own intelligence, or orders from Voldemort to destroy Harry Potter, they homed in on his position, focusing their attempts at breaking through on him and practically ignoring everyone else. With his Patronus no longer focused and spread out over such a large area, Harry could merely strain to hold the barrier, instead of using it to destroy the Dementors.

With the Dementors focusing on Harry's position behind the center of the defensive line, the front had a much easier time recovering, but the ground they had lost during their battle with the Dementors had been costly, and dozens of soldiers, witches, sorcerers, and wizards lay on the ground, dead or soulless as they fell back. A dozen giants had made it through the southern flank, despite the reinforcements, and had wreaked havoc there before the combined artillery from General Rotan and an entire battalion of ice soldiers had taken them down.

The result was that the battle line was no longer straight; instead, the southern flank had been pushed much further back than the center or the northern side, something Voldemort's forces made good use of. Now that the wards were down and the creatures not immune to magic were able to engage in close quarters, the remainder of his army charged ahead. With an unearthly roar, vampires and werewolves rushed forward, an unstoppable torrent of dark creatures that tore apart anything in front of them. The southern flank suddenly found itself cut off and fighting to not get attacked from the rear.

General Rotan tore his sword out of a vampire, before slashing its throat with his silver-bladed dagger. The dark creature died with a shriek that was lost in the thunder of the Ice people's artillery as the heavy cannons opened up once more. Large explosive rounds slammed into the oncoming enemies, tearing gaping holes into their ranks; holes that, Rotan noticed grimly, were being filled up quickly. Seeing three werewolves approach the gun emplacement from the side where they'd been cut off from the rest of the defending troops, the aging general ran ahead, his guards right behind him. They came

a moment too late, and the cannons fired for the last time as the werewolves tore into the soldiers manning them.

“Damned wolves,” Rotan muttered as he hacked off one of the wolves’ front paws, but it was too little, too late. The werewolf had already ripped out the gunner’s throat. Once they realized that they had opposition, the remaining two creatures turned around, sparking a furious melee around the huge cannons.

“General! Look out!”

The shout from one of his guardsmen caused Rotan to turn around and duck. A silver-tipped lance from the guard flashed by overhead, burying itself deeply into the chest of a vampire that had been poised to leap onto his back. Rotan didn’t get time to thank the man as the soldier suddenly found himself buried underneath a werewolf’s massive jaws, and the general snarled in anger as his men died around him. With an angry heave, he kicked at the anti-infantry cannon that had been deserted the moment the werewolves had charged, turning it on its mount until it was faced into the oncoming hordes.

Swinging himself around into position, he gripped the handles and squeezed the triggers. The weapon roared to life, spitting fire and explosive shells from its four barrels. Ahead of him, a line of dark creatures exploded into a bloody mist as they were hit, and he continued to track the weapon around the battlefield wherever he could without hitting his own men, unheeding of the melee that was still going on around him. He could hear and feel the Dementors overhead, but right now there was nothing that he could do about them; most of the witches and wizards had fled the moment the front line had crumbled. With a disgusted snort, he glanced over his shoulder as the smoldering corpse of a werewolf hit the side of the cannon. A Trazkanabian sorcerer gave him a quick nod, to which Rotan replied with a thumbs-up as he pointed towards the direction of the other regiments.

The sorcerer understood and began rallying people around him, even as Rotan continued firing. Their position wouldn’t last much longer,

cut off as they were, he realized. They had to get back in touch with the other parts of their forces. That either meant a push forward, which would be almost impossible, since the enemy had forced them almost into the building at this point, or have the other sections fall back, as well.

Neither sat well with the general. A push would cost them too many lives, while falling back would give up valuable ground and lose them their heavy weapons emplacements. As it was, they couldn't use their heavy cannons and anti-infantry cannons to clear the way without running the risk of hitting allied troops, which meant it was up to the other sections to reestablish contact. Rotan looked down at the crate of ammunition by his feet. At least it looked like they wouldn't run out anytime soon, he thought with grim amusement.

A scream from behind him caused him to turn around, right as one of Hiscophney's men was torn to shreds by a werewolf. Ice soldiers rushed in to contain the beast before it reached the gun emplacement, but the wolf charged at them with a ferocity that left them all shocked and open to its claws and fangs. Rotan recognized the wolf's distinctive silver coat immediately.

"Greyback," he growled, beckoning another soldier over to take his place at the gun. With the weapon safely in someone else's hands and continuing to lay down suppression fire, Rotan drew his sword and stepped forward, his men clearing the area around.

The werewolf looked up, fresh blood dripping from its teeth, and snarled viciously. Rotan merely angled his blade forward, and readied himself to meet the charge of the most feared werewolf in centuries.

Count Hiscophney didn't need to see the swarm of vampires and werewolves and other kinds of dark creatures sweeping past on his right side to know that they were in trouble. Ever since the wards had failed and given the Dementors free reign, many of the witches and wizards from the Ministry's Auror department had panicked; the few that remained were mostly veterans of the Order, or of the first war with Voldemort, like Mad-Eye Moody. The crazy old auror was one of

the few that remained with Hiscophney's section, and right now he was one of the few holding up a Patronus charm to keep away the Dementors. Hiscophney's men could do it, as well, but not many sorcerers that studied black magic could create something as pure as a Patronus, leaving him almost entirely dependent on wizards.

As it was, the only thing that was allowing them to hold their position right now was the constant barrage of artillery that came from their left side, from the northern flank's heavy gun emplacements that were still intact. The Ice people's heavy weapons, with their mixed ammunition of high explosives, incendiary rounds, and silver bullets were proving highly effective in halting the assault, but they were nearly useless at close range. Thanks to the ground they had lost before the Patronii went up, they had been forced to fall back almost to the center emplacement; with the guns in the center and on the south flank silent, the northern cannons were the only thing that stood between them and being overrun and pushed all the way back to the inner defenses.

Hiscophney was glad that whoever was in charge over at the northern section knew that, and had put every effort into maintaining a perimeter around the cannons and their operators to allow them to continue shooting. However, neither section had enough troops to make up for lost ground, which left their formation cockeyed and the southern flank completely cut off. The Count was very surprised when, right after he hurled a spray of acid at a werewolf, he heard the heavy report of the Ice people's anti-personnel cannon start up on the south side.

Glancing over, he could vaguely make out one of his sorcerers and a troop of ice soldiers trying to make their way over to them, only to be halted by the stream of dark creatures that separated the two groups. Taking a quick look around, Hiscophney realized that sooner or later, they would have to fall back, anyway, because with their front line split, the enemy had a clear path to come around and hit their backs. He made his choice.

"Fall back!" he shouted over the din of combat, casting a quick spell and throwing a specific set of colored sparks into the air. Around him, his troops immediately replied as the ones in the back took several

steps backwards, found themselves new cover, and opened fire to cover the retreat of the front line. This stretched the connection between the center section and the northern flank even more. Knowing that they had to keep those guns firing, Hiscophney found his second-in-command.

“Get those weapons the Ice people have set up, and move them all the way back to the inner sanctum!” he ordered. “I want them aimed right at the doors! Be ready to shoot anything that’s not a friendly after we fall back!”

“Understood! What about the north flank?”

Hiscophney glanced over. “I’ll take care of it. Make sure you send a company to try and reconnect with Rotan’s side, we can’t afford to let them outflank us!”

“Yes, sir!”

The Count spared a few seconds to watch as the other sorcerer took off, before returning his attention to the raging battle. “You!” he pointed at an ice soldier. “Grab your battalion, and follow me!”

Without waiting for a reply, the Count turned around and started heading north, his own squadron of sorcerers around him. The ice soldier took a moment to collect his people and followed. He couldn’t help but feel a sense of dread, despite the five hundred sorcerers and fellow soldiers, at the sight of the looming opposition between them and the northern side. Hiscophney and his sorcerers didn’t seem to notice as they blasted their way through with ruthless efficiency.

The sorcerers, with Hiscophney at the head, carved a bloody path through the enemy formation, leaving very little for the battalion of ice soldiers trailing behind to deal with.

“Well, well, well...if it isn’t the sorcerer who took Lucius’s head.” The cruel voice was accompanied by a scream of pain as a bludgeoning hex killed one of the ice soldiers.

Hiscophney arched an eyebrow as he eyed the two men standing in front of him coolly. "Lestrange, I suppose. Though which of you is which keeps eluding me."

Rabastan laughed, amused by the sorcerer's mocking. "Rabastan Lestrange, at your service. You killed my brother."

"If by keeping them you mean slitting their throats after you're done with them," Draco Malfoy muttered from next to him. Then, louder, the blonde snarled at the Count. "You killed my father, you bastard!"

"It appears we are at an impasse," Hiscophney commented as he took note of the scores of creatures and Death Eaters surrounding the Lestrange brothers. "I've been looking forward to meeting you, and sending you to meet Malfoy." He smirked at Draco. "Both of you."

Rudolphus sneered in return. "After we're done with England, your island is next, sorcerer. The Dark Lord will never stop."

"That's what I expected. Therefore...Ignis Abyssus!"

The hellfire spell roared from the Count's outstretched hands towards the two Death Eaters, who both dove out of the way. The giant who stood behind them wasn't so fortunate, and toppled over, screaming in agony as his flesh was scorched and his bones reduced to ash in an instant. Rabastan managed to rise to his feet gracefully, throwing up a shield spell in the process. Draco wasn't quite able to match his performance, and rolled around on the ground, trying to put out his burning cloak.

Chapter 45

By: Claihmsolais

Sparks flew off the blade of the sword as Rotan twisted it around to shield himself from Fenrir Greyback's claws then brought it around in a swing that would have split the werewolf's torso open. The werewolf was faster than that and ducked, springing forward in a headbutt that caught the aging general in the chest. Rotan flew back, skidding a few feet across the ground, mostly unscathed thanks to his enchanted armor. Greyback stood still for a moment, before rising onto two feet and walking over almost casually.

Rotan leaned on his sword as he stood back up, then brought it up in a vicious slash that caught the werewolf in the hip. Greyback's reflexes saved him from taking any more damage as he spun to the side to avoid the sword. The werewolf growled angrily and leapt up into the air, coming down hard on the general. Rotan raised his blade, only to find it batted aside by sharp claws, and barely managed to wedge his sword in between himself and Greyback's heavy body as the werewolf landed on top of them, bringing both of them crashing to the ground.

Greyback snapped at his neck angrily, held at bay only by the sword Rotan was struggling to hold in between them. The old general heaved, trying to toss Greyback off his chest, but the wolf was too heavy. The strain of trying to hold off the werewolf's weight with his arms slowly forced the sword down, bringing Greyback's fangs ever closer to his neck. Rotan couldn't spare a hand to reach for the dagger in his belt, nor could he use his legs, pinned under Greyback's as they were. Blood began seeping out from his fist where he was clutching the blade of his sword, mixing with the blood that was dripping down from Greyback's mouth.

"Telum Argentis!" the conjured silver arrow slammed into Greyback's side, causing him to roll over and howl in pain as the silver burned its way through his fur and skin. Rotan used the diversion to pull his arms – now freed from the burden of his

opponent's weight – back and punch the werewolf in the snout with his armored gauntlet.

Greyback howled in frustration and dove to the side to avoid the barrage of spells that followed, allowing Rotan to regain his footing. The general gave a quick nod to Remus Lupin as the former teacher reached him from where he'd fired at Greyback. The werewolf was getting back to his feet, as well, his left side smoking and burnt. Lupin shuddered at the look of intense hatred in Greyback's eyes – he had seen such a look before, but never combined with such a thirst for blood as in Fenrir Greyback. At that point, Remus realized that no matter how much he tried to rally the werewolf community to oppose Voldemort, Greyback was far beyond any redemption. He would shed blood and continue shedding blood until he was either killed, or everyone on the planet was dead. Fenrir Greyback wasn't really allied with Voldemort, he just ran along a parallel track, killing the people in the dark lord's way first. But once the war was over and Voldemort had won, the werewolf would turn against him, as well.

"You take him on the left," Rotan muttered quietly. Remus nodded and the two spread out, slowly circling around Greyback until the werewolf had trouble tracking both of them at the same time.

Greyback made his move, knowing that once he could no longer see both of his opponents at the same time, he would be vulnerable. Lowering himself down to all fours, he took advantage of the leg strength of his werewolf form and rushed towards Lupin, knowing that the wizard, with his ability to conjure up silver arrows and fire spells, was by far the more dangerous opponent. Remus saw the charge, but the sheer speed of it caught him off-guard, forcing him to dive to the side to avoid being eviscerated by Greyback's claws. The werewolf skidded to a halt and turned around, lining up for another dash at the wizard, only to find himself caught in an explosion of smoke and debris. Ignoring the visual hindrance and relying on his sense of smell to guide him, Greyback charged again.

Remus allowed himself an almost Snape-like smirk as he heard Greyback dashing forward through the smoke. He'd cast an explosive hex into the ground as he dove to the side, knowing that it would

visually impair him, but he had wanted Greyback to think he was desperate. He knew that the werewolf didn't have to rely on sight to find him, and stood perfectly still, waiting for Greyback to emerge from the smoke. When he did, Remus hauled back and tossed the dagger he held in his left hand, before conjuring up a barrier in front of him.

Greyback howled as the dagger struck and he ran right into an invisible, solid wall, more from the shock of running into a barrier than the pain. Soon, though, he began curling in on himself as the Wolfsbane poison the dagger had been coated with took effect, setting his blood on fire as the poison fought with his werewolf blood for dominance. The long snout shortened and the fur all over his body slowly receded, and Greyback continued screaming in agony. Lupin and Rotan carefully approached him as he lay on the ground. Rotan began reaching for his silver-coated dagger.

"Wait." Remus glanced down at the twisting, shivering man on the ground. "We need to know what Voldemort's plan is."

"What do you mean?" Rotan had the dagger at the ready, and was kneeling next to Greyback, ready to slit his throat.

"No one's seen Voldemort on the battlefield. It's as if he's not even here. Every time he's fought in an open battle, he was all the way up front, tearing through our troops, but not this time. He's nowhere around. It's like he's somewhere else."

Rotan looked at the other man, a grim set to his jaw. "You think he's gone to Azkaban."

"I don't know for sure, but we should find out." Remus knelt down and reached out to secure Greyback's arms. "Greyback, listen to me. Greyback!"

"G-g-go t-to h-h-hell, Lupin!" the werewolf hissed. "W-what have y-y-you d-done to me?"

“It’s a derivative of the Wolfsbane potion, Greyback. It’s fighting with your werewolf blood to try and reverse the transformation.” Remus left unsaid that because it was a combat poison, Snape had deliberately added to the mixture in order to cause pain and slow down the transformation to incapacitate its target.

“S-s-snape, that f-filthy l-little...w-when I get m-m-my hands on h-him...”

“Greyback, listen to me,” Lupin began, only to be cut off as the downed werewolf reached out with a shaky hand and wrapped it around Lupin’s neck.

“N-no listening, n-n-no s-surrender.”

“You’re dying, Greyback. That poison in the dose you were given is lethal.” Remus easily removed the hand from his throat. “Where is Voldemort? Tell me, Greyback. Where is he?”

The werewolf managed a tortured chuckle. “And w-what? You’ll g-give me the anti-dote? I’d r-rather die than a-accept help f-from you.”

Rotan and Lupin shared a quick look. “There is no antidote,” Remus told Greyback softly. “The poison is irreversible. Even if you did survive, you will never again transform.”

“Well, then, you can keep me company in hell!” Remus tried to get out of the way, but Greyback managed to produce a dagger from his tattered robes and stab it deep into the former teacher’s chest. Lupin fell back, clutching at the weapon, even as Greyback slowly rose to his feet, blood gushing from his mouth and eyes. “If I die, then I will take you all to hell with me-“

Greyback cut off in his maniacal laughter when Rotan’s sword swiftly decapitated him. The headless body collapsed to the ground, and Rotan quickly knelt next to Lupin. “That hurt,” Remus noted dryly, coughing up a little blood.

"Don't talk. Let me see if I can pull out the dagger." Rotan inspected the wound. The blade was in deep, but luckily it had missed all of the vital organs. Greyback had aimed for the heart, but Lupin's last second dodge had caused the dagger to glance off his ribs. Sure, the bone was nicked, but that could easily be fixed. No, the more threatening issue was blood loss, because he was sure that the weapon was enchanted, and he didn't want to risk pulling it out. Rotan tore a strip of fabric from his tunic. "Here, hold that around the wound."

Remus did as he was told, his eyes widening in surprise when instead of stemming the bleeding, the action of pressing the cloth against the wound increased it. "What the—"

"It's enchanted," Rotan growled. Probably the more one tried to stop the bleeding, the more it would bleed, he thought darkly.

"Stupid Greyback." Remus deadpanned, glancing over at the headless corpse.

"We need to get you to a medic." Rotan stood, looking around. "Can you stand?"

Remus tried to get back to his feet, but even with help from the general, his knees kept buckling. "Damn. Looks like it was poisoned, too."

Rotan frowned as he called his guards around him. They had to get Remus into the building, which meant punching a line through the enemy attack. That would take a lot of skill and a minor miracle. The werewolves ahead of them charged ahead, enraged by Greyback's death, and had slammed into Rotan's front line with full force. Their renewed assault had taken the defenders by surprise, and the line had buckled, so much so that the gun emplacement he'd used earlier was now silent, and individual melees and chaos were spreading throughout his section.

Rotan waved over one of his guards. "Make sure he's safe," he ordered, gesturing down at Lupin. "We need to get him inside. Take your men and try to make your way towards the building."

"What about you, sir?"

"I'll keep them off your back. We can't let them get into the building until the defenses are complete."

The ice soldier looked like he was about to object, but then nodded, collecting a dozen men and making his way towards the rear of their lines. Rotan watched them go for a long moment, hoping that they'd be facing less opposition than the unit he'd sent to try and reach the center sections under Hiscophney's command.

"Forsta!" he shouted in his native tongue, holding his sword high up in the air. Around him, the ice soldiers recognized the call, and those that were not immediately engaged rallied around. "Reform your lines! Dig your heels into the ground! For the honor of the North!"

"For the honor of the North!" the battlecry echoed around him as the soldiers set themselves to meet the oncoming forces of darkness.

Hiscophney didn't show it, but he was worried. It wasn't so much that either Rabastan Lestrange or Draco Malfoy were a threat to him, far from it. Individually, their dueling skills, while impressive, were far inferior to his. It was the fact that both of them together had managed to even the odds more than the Count liked to admit. The troops that had accompanied him were currently engaged in a brutal melee with the dark forces Draco and Lestrange had brought with them, and with the battle all around him, the Count found himself unable to use more destructive spells. Add to that the fact that each time he knocked one of them away, he was unable to finish his opponent off, because the other would try and attack him from behind.

What was worse was that he knew they were stalling him. Neither of the dark wizards held out any hope to actually be able to defeat him

in single combat – well, maybe Lestrange did, but the man was borderline delusional with regards to his skills in the dark arts. They were merely holding up his attempt to relieve the northern flank, knowing that if they could overrun those guns, they would have a clear shot at the rest of the Ministry.

Then something he'd been afraid of during the whole battle happened. The guns on the northern emplacement fell silent as the hiss of a giant snake resonated around the battlefield. The guns picked up again almost immediately, but that brief pause had been long enough for the hordes of creatures to push their way almost to the large cannons. By now, his own troops were cut off from either flank as the defensive lines crumbled, and they were almost completely surrounded. A few stray Dementors swooped down across the lines, sucking out whatever souls they could get a hold of. Out of the two battalions he had brought with him, . He knew what that meant. They were out of time.

Muttering a quick prayer for the desecration he was about to commit, he gripped the pendant that hung around his neck and prepared to unleash one of his most powerful spells. Draco and Lestrange saw him just standing there, and took the opening, firing off the killing curse. Before the sickly green spells could reach the sorcerer, a wave of energy rippled out from Hiscophney, washing across an area a hundred yards in diameter. All of the fighting stopped as the ground began to shake, the marble stairs crumbling under their feet. Ice soldiers, sorcerers, dark creatures, and wizards fought to keep their balance as the localized earthquake shook the ground, but only the sorcerers, and only those closest to Hiscophney, knew what this meant.

The green bolts of the killing curse dissipated against the wave, leaving both Draco and Lestrange staring in open-mouthed surprise. After a minute, the ground stopped shaking and started collapsing downwards, caving in as though the earth itself underneath the Ministry had just disappeared. The wind picked up, howling in everyone's ear as everyone and everything inside the hundred-yard radius of the spell found themselves pulled towards the center of the spell. Hiscophney stood there, seemingly unaffected by the forces

acting on everything else as he commanded his magic to create the most forbidden of objects: a black hole.

“O blackness without beginning or end...” the Count chanted as he stood in the center of the maelstrom, his arms spread wide. “One-eyed god imprisoned there, now harken to my call!”

The entire ground around contracted, space itself warping inside the hemispherical spell as the magic forced everything into an implosion that would kill anything within and tear a gaping hole into Voldemort’s forces. Hiscophney knew what he was doing; there was a reason why this spell was sealed away and considered banned. It went far beyond manipulating the elements, it called on the force of gravity itself to create something so dangerous that, if it went out of control, it could easily destroy the entire world. He was aware that he was dooming hundreds of his fellow Trazkabanian sorcerers and ice soldiers to death, but looking at the fighting going on around him, Voldemort’s forces would take a much greater hit. With any luck, this one spell would wipe out thousands of dark creatures and wizards.

A small smile played around Hiscophney’s lips as he thought of his wife and daughter. Their culture was a violent one, but despite that, they treasured women and children, because they were a symbol of the future, something that he believed the wizarding world had long forgotten. As he prepared himself to finish the spell and collapse the entire sphere, along with the several thousand beings in it, into a pinprick, he knew that his family would be safe. Lord Polairix would see to it.

“Gravity-“ he halted in the middle of the final words to the spell when a new battlecry rose from behind the dark forces. That was followed by a hail of arrows so thick it blocked out the sky. The silver-tipped arrows brought down vampires and werewolves alike, and Death Eaters dropped in scores from the opening salvo. Everyone around Hiscophney, all the men and creatures that would have gotten caught in his spell, looked up as his shimmering dome dissipated, to behold the sight of dozens of goblin airships flying by overhead, their archers already nocking another set of arrows. The air resounded with the

report of the airships' heavy cannons as fire and death rained down on Voldemort's forces from above.

The pop of multiple apparitions signaled the entry of more wizards to the battle, and Hiscophney found himself staring into the face of Neville Longbottom. The boy gave him a shy grin and a sloppy salute. "Potter's Legion, reporting, Mr. Commander, sir."

"Didn't Potter order you children to stay at home?"

"He did, but this is going to affect all of us. This isn't your war, or the ice people's war. This is our war. It's because wizards like Fudge that you got dragged into this. Being here, fighting alongside you, is the least we can do." Neville glanced over at the still shell-shocked Draco and Rabastan Lestrange. "I'll take Draco. We better hurry, before the surprise wears off."

"Agreed." Hiscophney smirked and threw a lightning spell at Lestrange, effectively separating him from Draco. Maybe there is hope for the wizarding world yet, he thought, with people like Potter and Longbottom.

Harry strained under the force of the Dementors' assault, and the few Patronii interspersed between the fighting groups didn't do much to help. The entirety of the battle around them vanished as he closed his eyes in concentration. The thousand Dementors battering at his mental shields took more power to hold at bay than he believed he had, but the ivory wand in his hand continued to maintain its brilliant white light. He wasn't aware of the frontlines crumbling, wasn't aware that the ice people's heavy artillery had stopped firing. He didn't know that the southern flank had been cut off, or that Hiscophney's attempt to come to the northern flank's aid had been stopped cold and surrounded. He knew nothing of Rotan's duel with Fenrir Greyback, or that around him, ice people and sorcerers were rushing inside to move the anti-personnel cannons from the center emplacement.

All he knew was that there was something evil, malicious, and dark battering at his mind, and that he needed to keep it at bay. Then, suddenly, he heard a voice in his mind.

Master, we are here. We hear your command. We will fight. The strain eased a little bit, enough for Harry to open his eyes. Above him, he could see Dementors dashing around each other, their shadowy forms entwined in a deadly flying ballet. From the north, a small stream of Dementors drove deep into the masses hovering above them as the creatures arrived from Azkaban. Harry could only look on in surprise as the hundred or so Dementors that were bound to the seat of Polairix dueled with a force ten times their size.

“Expecto Patronum!” The shout went up just after the friendly Dementors arrived.

Friendly Dementors? Harry mused with a slight hint of amusement. He wouldn’t have believed it possible, but...

The combined Patronii from the Legion along with the distraction provided by the Dementors overhead finally allowed Harry some breathing room. He glanced over, only to find a unit of ice soldiers under heavy fire. While he could move and think and didn’t have to dedicate his entire will to holding the Dementors at bay, he still was unable to effectively engage in combat. “Shacklebolt,” he called out. The dark-skinned auror immediately broke off his spellcasting and looked over where Harry was pointing with his free hand.

“Got it, Harry,” he replied. “Evans, McDermott, Owens, you’re with me. Let’s give them some fire support!”

The four aurors took off, managing to give the ice soldiers enough support to break through. When they passed him, Harry’s blood ran cold when he realized they were carrying an injured Remus Lupin with them. One of the soldiers hurried over from the injured werewolf. “Milord, a message from Master Lupin and General Rotan. Voldemort is not on this battlefield.”

“What?”

“Voldemort is not here, milord,” the ice soldier repeated.

Dear lord... Harry thought, looking up at the Dementors above him. Was the fortress under attack when you left? he thought up at the friendlies from Azkaban.

No, a cacophony of eerie voices replied.

“I need to leave,” Harry muttered.

“Milord?” The ice soldier looked confused.

“I need to leave, now! Voldemort’s attacking Azkaban at this moment!” Harry looked out over the battlefield, for the first time noticing the goblin reinforcements. One airship was painted a dark gold, and it was followed by a second one in a silver trim. The two of them were heavily guarded, set in the middle of a formation of at least a dozen other airships that were making a beeline for Harry’s position. Even as he watched, one of them got hit by a massive firespell from below, the ship’s belly exploding into splinters as it fell out of the sky. Goblin soldiers, most armed to the teeth, fell out of the now open hull, orienting their bodies and weapons downwards. Even in death, they would inflict as much damage as they could.

The airships stopped right over Harry, and two ropes dropped down. Lord Silver and Lord Gold rappelled down from their respective command ships to stand before Harry. “The goblin army is here to aid, Lord Polairix, as per the conditions of our treaty.”

The goblin grinned toothily. “It will be our pleasure to provide our assistance in this battle. We bring to bear our fleet and army, numbering three thousand soldiers,” Lord Silver declared formally.

The ice soldier that had come over spoke up, filling in Harry on the situation. “Milord, the southern flank with General Rotan is almost entirely cut off. He is rallying our forces to make a stand and cover our retreat, but without our heavy weapons it’s only a matter of time before they are surrounded. I do not know the status of the other

units, but it is likely that the northern flank is also facing heavy opposition. Their cannons are the only ones still firing.”

Glancing over the area, Harry realized that the soldier was right. He could tell Hiscophney’s troops were preparing to fall back; a regiment of ice soldiers was hauling the large cannons they had brought into the hall behind them. Once the center pulled back to reconnect with the south, that would leave the northern section in a similar predicament. “Lord Silver, please order your men to concentrate their attacks on clearing a path for our southern flank. We need to clear a path for them to reform the battle line with the other sections.”

“As you wish.” The goblin looked up and bellowed a few orders in his native tongue, before grabbing on to the rope and being hauled back up to his ship.

Harry looked at Lord Gold. “Please take your soldiers and cover the retreat of the northern flank. We need to keep our frontlines together while they pull back. Since you have the high ground, I leave command of the battle to you. Please locate General Rotan and Count Hiscophney as soon as you can. You three will be in command of the battle.”

“What about you, Lord Polairix?”

“I need to head to Azkaban. Voldemort is there. The attack on the Ministry was a diversion. He’s after the Rod of Dominion.” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “We need to get rid of those Dementors up in the air.”

A soft pop next to him alerted Harry to the new arrival. Luna Lovegood smiled at him with her usual vacant smile, but he could see in her eyes that she was anything but absent. “We can take care of them, Harry,” she said in a strangely melodious tone.

“Luna? But—”

“It is our battle, as well, Harry.”

He looked at her helplessly for a moment, before nodding. “All right, but if any of you get killed...” he didn’t need to say anything more. Luna understood. If any of the students died, he would never forgive himself. Her smile almost faltered as she realized that it would be inevitable in the chaotic battle, but she and Neville had realized that it was necessary for them to come, after they had spotted the wave of Dementors flying overhead. To keep everyone safe, they had agreed to use portkeys to transport Legion members – all of whom had volunteered – to locations that they deemed safe enough to cast a Patronus from.

“Look,” Luna said, pointing up where dozens of silvery shields had just sprung up from where the members of Potter’s Legion had cast their spells, effectively halting the Dementors’ advance on Harry’s position.

Harry looked at Lord Gold. “Tell your airships to clear the area immediately above me. I’ve got an idea.” He looked down at his ivory wand, remembering the rush of power that had gone through him when he had cast the Patronus before.

The goblin nodded, belting out his orders. “I shall take my leave and assist the northern flank, as you ordered. I pray for your safe return and victory, Lord Polairix.”

“And the same to you, Lord Gold. And all of your people.”

The goblin nodded graciously, before his airship took off, spitting fire from its belly-mounted cannons. A few minutes later, the airspace above Harry was clear of airships. A mental command had all friendly Dementors withdraw to a safe distance, as well, and Harry suddenly found himself back under the immense pressure of a thousand Dementors as they closed in with him. He raised his wand, summoning all the strength he had.

“Expecto Patronum!” he shouted, and once more a brilliant beam of light speared from his wand into the mass of Dementors above. Dozens of creatures shrieked as they disintegrated when the beam expanded to several feet in diameter. Elation swept through Harry as

he realized his crazy plan worked. Sweeping his wand through the air, he cut through the Dementors' ranks, decimating the creatures. When the beam faded, Harry collapsed to the ground, winded, but the skies were clear. A cheer went up all around him when the fighters realized that the oppressive mental pressure from the dark creatures was gone; the few stragglers that were left were easily held at bay by the Legion members and wizards that were present.

"In the name of the Queen," the ice soldier whispered in awe.

Luna quickly leaned down and pulled a flask from her belt, handing it to Harry. "A Pepper-up potion," she explained. "We figured we might need them if this battle goes on for a while."

The young lord of Polairix took the flask, gulping down the potion almost greedily. Within moments, he could feel his energy return, though he knew it was only temporarily. "My wand...where's my wand?"

"Over here, milord!" the soldier pointed out.

Harry walked over and picked it up, dropping it almost instantly again when the searing hot wood touched his skin. Smoke was wafting off the wand's tip as it lay smoldering on the marble floor. Drawing his black ash wand, Harry cast a quick cooling charm on it, before picking it up. He held it in his hands for a moment, looking at the wand crafter's creation in awe.

"I didn't think it was actually possible," he whispered. Then he realized something. "Azkaban! I need to get to Azkaban!"

"Go, Harry," Luna encouraged. "We can handle things here." She waved her hand towards the frontlines. The battle was still fierce; the Ice people's artillery on the north flank was still spitting fire, and the goblin airships were raining down death from above, while goblin soldiers were leaping from enemy to enemy, displaying surprising agility as they slit throats, stabbed, and clubbed their opponents to death. Spells were erupting anywhere where wizards or sorcerers clashed with Voldemort's dark forces, and a renewed battlecry

echoed from the southern flank as Lord Silver's goblins relieved the Rotan's struggling company.

Sorcerers, Ice people, wizards, and goblins were fighting alongside a common evil. And for the first time since the battle had begun, Harry started to believe that Luna was right. They would handle things here. He had a date with the strongest dark wizard in centuries. "Take care," he told Luna, pulling the surprised girl into a hug. Turning to the soldier, he said, "make sure the Legion members have extra protection. Pull them all the way back inside if you have to. Understand?"

"Yes, milord!" The ice soldier replied with a smile, understanding why Harry had given the order. It wasn't so much because Harry wanted to save his friends at the expense of someone else's life – it was because they were children and teenagers, young adults of a new generation. A generation that was willing to fight for what they believed in, and Harry wanted to protect that. The soldier found himself agreeing.

Stepping back, Harry saluted the soldier. "Tell General Rotan and Count Hiscophney I expect this place to still be standing when I come back. I've got a dark idiot to kill."

Before the soldier could return the salute, Harry had already apparated to the fortress island of Azkaban.

Chapter 46

By: Claihmsolais

Dead bodies littered the ground as Harry appeared. He was surprised there weren't more wearing the armor of the ice people, but Captain Nailoff had done an amazing job at organizing a defense with the fifty soldiers he had been left with. Dozens of Death Eaters were littering the yard of the fortress, most of them with smoking holes in their chest. Looking up, Harry could see the gun emplacements the ice soldiers had used to cut down the invaders.

He walked through the fortress, knowing where he was going, glad to see the place devoid of life. It meant the ice soldiers had followed his orders and vacated the island as soon as Voldemort and his Death Eaters had breached the inner defenses. The torches and lamps the Ice people had set up flickered as they lit the way down into the ruins beneath the former prison fortress. Harry was surprised to see that there weren't any Death Eaters around, figuring that Voldemort would have left a few behind to guard against the soldiers returning.

"Harry!" a female voice shouted from the darkness.

The young Lord of Polairix whirled around, wand in hand, only to let out a relieved breath when a familiar redhead ran out of the darkness, skidding to a halt when she found herself at wandpoint. "Thank goodness you're here," the girl cried, taking a tentative step forward.

Harry looked her over. Ginny looked like she had been through hell. Her robes were torn and charred, her skin was showing blisters and burns and bruises. Her red hair was smattered with mud and what looked to be dried blood, turning the fiery red color a dark coppery-brown. The girl's face was by far the worst off. One of her eyes was swollen shut, her lower lip was split, and blood was trickling from the corner of her mouth. Bloody gashes covered her cheeks, and there was a long line of red along her throat where Harry guessed someone had tried to slit her throat. Her eyes were wild and unfocused, gleaming with desperation and fear, and she was swaying on her feet in obvious exhaustion.

Looking around and finding no one else around, Harry relaxed his guard somewhat. Ginny's presence changed things; the way she looked, he needed to get her medical attention, whether she was the traitor or not. Despite all the facts pointing towards it, Harry really hoped that she wasn't – he had the feeling Voldemort wouldn't treat anyone like this, not even his enemies. Actually, Harry mused with grim realization, Voldemort did treat his enemies just like this...most just didn't live through it.

"What happened?" he asked, still cautious. He never lowered his wand, though he took a step towards her.

"It was Tonks," Ginny whispered hoarsely as her legs buckled and she collapsed to the ground. "She's a traitor, Harry! You've got to warn the others!"

Kneeling down next to her, Harry helped Ginny sit up against the wall. He shrugged off his cloak and covered her shivering form with it.
"What do you mean?"

"She...she just walked into the library, right after you guys came back. I was there with F-Fred and George, we were helping Hermione with looking through a few b-books that she'd pulled out. H-Hermione stepped out for a moment to check on you, and Tonks just drew her wand and s-started throwing spells around!" Ginny sobbed hysterically. "T-Tonks, she blew Fred into the wall with some kind of dark curse, and he started bleeding, a-a-and she just cut up George. Oh Harry, it was awful!"

"What happened then?" Harry asked. He hated putting her through this, but what she was telling him was the first real clue to what had happened in the library of Nair'i'caix. A flicker of doubt started creeping up in his mind. Could Ginny actually be innocent? He had been the one who had concluded that Ginny was the traitor by her conspicuous absence, but even before that, Tonks had mysteriously gone missing. Maybe they had been too quick to jump to conclusions. Maybe Moody was right in his suspicions about the metamorphmagus's sudden disappearances. Even Dumbledore,

whom she had claimed she was working for, had acknowledged that she had, at times, gone missing for far longer than they had planned.

"She...she took me," Ginny whispered. "To see him. Oh God, Harry..."

Harry shook his head. No, Tonks would never betray us. She hates Voldemort and what he stands for just as much as I do. She would never join him and do something like this, he thought. But then again, he was forced to admit the same about Ginny. The situation was giving him a headache. "Ginny," he called softly. "Are you sure it was Tonks? Absolutely sure?"

"Yes." She hiccupped and swallowed hard. "It was Tonks. They...Harry, the beating was the easiest part of it. They...they took me, and the Cruciatus..." she trailed off, shuddering. "They...they brought me here. I thought they were going to kill me, but they brought me here. I don't know why, but I managed to get away while they were fighting. And when the soldiers left, I...I just ran and hid."

"All right," Harry whispered soothingly. "It'll be all right." His animosity for the girl was put on the backburner. Right now, she needed his help, and what she'd been through eclipsed any pain she'd caused Harry. He did, after all, know how Voldemort treated his prisoners. All too well.

He held her for a while, until her breathing calmed and she stopped shuddering like a leaf in the wind. "Can you stand?" he asked. When she nodded faintly, he helped her up and reached into his robes, pulling out a silver medallion. "Here, this is a portkey that will take you back to Nair'i'caix. Use it. I need to go and take care of Voldemort."

"All right..." Ginny looked at the simple round piece of silver for a moment, before taking it, clenching her blood-encrusted hand around it. "Harry," she called out after he'd turned around.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry...for everything." Then she vanished, before Harry could respond.

Voldemort looked at the Rod of Dominion as it hung suspended in the air, behind its protective red barrier. He turned to look the traitor, who'd accompanied him. "Remarkable, isn't it? Such power in such a simple-looking staff. I'd expected something more...ornate."

The woman at his side remained impassive, the dagger in her hand still dripping blood. Behind her lay the three corpses of what remained of Voldemort's inner circle. After they had managed to penetrate this far down and reached the chamber with the Rod, Voldemort had given her the signal to kill them. The men had gone down pathetically easy, never really expecting to be stabbed in the back by the beaten and bruised woman who'd betrayed the Order of the Phoenix.

"Now, thanks to the texts you've brought me, my dear, I'll be able to access it." The dark wizard stretched out a hand, hovering it over the surface of the red barrier, almost caressing it.

"Not if I stop you first, Tom." The voice came from the entrance to the hall, and Voldemort snapped around in surprise.

"Didn't I already kill you, old man?" he hissed in annoyance.

Albus Dumbledore strode into the brightly-lit room. "You didn't do a very good job of it," the headmaster replied with a hint of humor. He was walking slowly, carefully. As he had planned, he had awoken from his coma with Fawkes's help while the fortress of Nair'i'caix was deserted, and everyone had left for the battle at the Ministry. Fawkes had teleported him to Azkaban, where he'd made his way down into the catacombs to await Voldemort. He was surprised at the woman's presence, his eyes narrowing as he realized that he had been wrong in assuming the identity of the traitor.

Voldemort shrugged. "It'll be a pleasure to finish it, then," he snarled, drawing his wand. The woman in the room stepped back as the two mages began circling each other. The dark wizard looked over his shoulder at the traitor briefly. "Go bring Potter here. And bring the prisoner. This is something I want him to see."

"Yes, Master," the woman replied stoically, before leaving the room. Dumbledore looked after for a moment, before Voldemort began firing off spells. The old headmaster no longer had time to think as he was forced on the defensive.

Harry followed the corridors until he reached the broken stairwell. Stepping through the illusion, he was surprised to hear sounds of battle coming from the chamber ahead. A wave of his wand snuffed out the torches around him, plunging him into complete darkness. Carefully, he made his way through the corridor, hidden by the shadows. An explosion rattled the foundations of the ruins, followed by a pained groan. By now, Harry had reached the end, and was pressing his back against the corridor wall to remain hidden.

He suppressed a gasp of surprise when Dumbledore crashed to the ground, bleeding and unable to get back up. The old headmaster didn't see him, knocked unconscious as the dark wizard approached him almost casually. Dumbledore's wand lay across the room, smoke wafting from its tip, and far out of his reach. Harry swore under his breath. As much as he hated giving up the element of surprise, as much as he hated Dumbledore being there, he couldn't let the old man die.

"Better make this one count, Harry," he muttered to himself as he leveled his ivory wand at Voldemort's approaching figure. Before he had a chance to even begin casting the spell, he suddenly found Voldemort looking straight at him.

"I know you're there, Potter. Come on out, or the old man dies right here." Voldemort sounded almost amused as Dumbledore's eyes fluttered open.

Cursing himself for not realizing that Voldemort had somehow detected him, Harry lifted his hands, still holding on to his wand, as he stepped out into the chamber. Ginny was right, he thought to himself. Tonks is the only one who- As he walked into the open, he noticed the dead bodies of three Death Eaters on the ground. The once-pristine room was pockmarked with craters and charred where the Voldemort and Dumbledore had dueled.

“So,” Harry finally said after a long pause. “Here we are again, Tom.”

“So we are, Harry,” Voldemort replied with a smirk.

“Now what?” Harry asked. “I assume that you’re just going to kill us all, get your hands on the Rod, and take over the world.”

“That’s about right,” the dark wizard confirmed, “but there are a few things I wanted to indulge in, first.”

Harry shrugged, glancing over at the Rod. “Look, Tom, there’s a little problem with your plan. I know you had a traitor among us, and I know that she brought you the texts we were studying to break the Rod out of the wards surrounding it.”

“Go on,” Voldemort nodded, his interest piqued.

“Well, the Rod doesn’t exist in this dimension,” Harry told him.

Voldemort snorted in amusement. “What are you talking about, of course it exists! You’re looking right at it!” The dark wizard eyed Harry suspiciously. “My minions didn’t hit you too hard upside the head, did they? You’re not hallucinating, are you?”

Harry blinked in surprise at the comment. Concern was the last thing he’d expected from Voldemort, and it had even sounded genuine – what was the world coming to? “Err...no, they didn’t hit me. In fact, I reckon they’re about to get their asses kicked right now.”

“Hmm...oh well.” Voldemort shrugged nonchalantly. “Good to hear you’re still in one piece, though.”

“Oh, because you wanted the pleasure of killing me personally?” Harry asked sarcastically.

“Almost, Harry.” Voldemort grinned toothily. “You see, when I first rose, the only wizard I was afraid of was Albus Dumbledore. He was acclaimed as the greatest wizard of all time. I admit it, I feared him. Respected him even. And when I returned...I found a new foe. A new archenemy, if you will. You, Harry Potter, have galvanized me, ruined my plans, and fought me on more occasions than even Albus Dumbledore, and you, you alone, have had more success in doing so than he ever had.” Voldemort spread his arms, gesturing all around him. “I realize now that almost dying when I tried to kill you has been a blessing. Because of it, I’ve become stronger, more powerful. Much more powerful. And when I fought Dumbledore again two days ago, I realized something: I had become so powerful that Albus Dumbledore is nothing. The one wizard, the greatest of all time, and he was nothing before my might.”

“Get to the point, Tom,” Harry snapped irritably. He’d been looking for an opportunity to fire off a spell at Voldemort while he was talking, but the dark wizard was always on guard.

“The point is, Harry Potter, that you have taken the place of Albus Dumbledore as my greatest enemy!” Voldemort announced grandly. “You are the only one with the potential to become as powerful as I am, and in the short time you’ve had, you’ve grown to be able to fight me on even ground. In fact, because you have grown so powerful in such a short time, one might even argue that you will become more powerful than me. Before I acquire the Rod of Dominion, before I continue to move on with my conquest of the wizarding world...I will fight and defeat you. I will finally put to rest my most worthy foe – you.”

“What?” Harry blinked in confusion. “You...you want to duel me? Like, man to man?”

“Correct.” Voldemort grinned. “If I can indeed overcome you, then the rest of the world will be within my grasp.”

Harry began to wonder if Voldemort hadn’t been hit on the head too hard at some point, because this man was different from the evil maniac mastermind he’d come to know. “What brought all of this on?” he asked finally, unable to understand why Voldemort would be asking him for a duel. Why not simply take the Rod and blast all of existence to hell? He looked around the room for anything that could be used as a distraction, and his gaze fell on the three dead Death Eaters. Now that he looked at them closer, he realized that they didn’t look like they had been killed by spells. A huge puddle of blood was forming around them. It made Harry wonder what had killed them.

“Curious about that, too?” Voldemort asked, noticing the direction of Harry’s gaze. “I can answer both in one, I believe.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Let me ask you this, Harry...what is conflict without an opponent? What point is there in war if there is no one to be fought?” the dark wizard didn’t wait for Harry to answer. “Simple, there is none. I fight this war for the extermination of all those who are unworthy. You have been my greatest opponent, Harry Potter, but once I hold the Rod of Dominion in my hands, even that will be no more. For the last time, I will fight you, before I kill you and move on. As for them,” Voldemort pointed at the three dead men, “the Rod holds inconceivable power, as do its protections. Why share the secret with those who are unworthy of it?”

Harry realized Voldemort truly was crazy. The dark wizard knew next to nothing about the Rod of Dominion, except for the fact that it was capable of killing him, and apparently was dangerous enough to be forever sealed away. He had somehow gotten the notion that with the Rod, he would be above all opposition – and Harry reluctantly admitted that he may be right. The Rod was a Deus Ex Machina, something so ludicrously powerful that it had to be lost to all time, because its power would corrupt even the purest of saints. And

before he got his hands on it, Voldemort wanted to duel him, duel someone he thought worthy, for nostalgia's sake.

The dark wizard's final comment also made Harry realize something else: Voldemort would never stop killing. The power at his fingertips was too compelling, too seductive. He may have set out to purge the world from muggles and mudbloods, but in the end, the darkness within would never let him stop killing, even if it meant turning on his former followers. He probably was rooting for his army to get decimated, Harry thought grimly. The only thing that would appease Voldemort was bloodshed...no matter whose blood it was.

"I see..." Harry said, slowly lowering his wand arm until it was resting by his side.

"I doubt you do," Voldemort laughed. "But maybe you will indulge me anyway."

Harry brought his wand up, holding it close to his right ear as he extended his left arm forward. His weight was shifted onto his back foot as he spread his legs shoulder-width apart. "I don't think I have any choice, do I?"

Voldemort eyed the teen with some amusement, recognizing the dueling stance as one of Bella's favorites. "No, you don't," he replied as he slid into a stance of his own. "I am told you have a warlock rune. I look forward to seeing what you can do."

Harry's eyes narrowed. It appeared that the spy had informed Voldemort of far more than the Rod's location. Fine, he wants to see what I can do? Time to dig real deep, then, Harry thought to himself. Twirling the wand through his hand to distract Voldemort from the spell he was casting, Harry fired off two blasting hexes in quick succession. The Dark lord ducked under the first, then simple batted the second one away with a negligent flick of his wand.

"Is that all you can do, Harry? You did so much better when we fought in Southhallerton. Malum Ictis!" The jet-black spear of magic

hurled towards Harry, forcing him to dive to the side. As he tumbled to the ground, he returned fire.

Three stunners impacted Voldemort's shields as the dark wizard raised a shimmering golden barrier around him with little more than a flick of his wrist. He let Harry rise back to his feet, smirking in amusement. "Like it? It's an archmage-level shield spell," Voldemort explained. "In fact, it's the only archmage-grade shield spell. Do you know why?"

Without replying, Harry flicked his wrist, sending a torrent of elemental spells towards his still opponent. Voldemort merely stood calmly as all the spells dissipated harmlessly against his barrier, causing no more than ripples in it. Harry gave up barraging the shield with spells, and slowly began to circle his enemy, trying to find a weak spot in the barrier.

"You won't find any weak spots, Harry." Voldemort said calmly, even though his back was facing Harry. "The reason Aegis Contego is the only archmage-level shield spell is because it is the only shield that is needed. It will stop anything. Anything," Voldemort cackled. "In fact, the only spell that will penetrate it is the killing curse. Are you willing to use it, Harry?"

Frowning, Harry flicked his wrist with a muttered "Comburo." The fire spell lashed out, but the flames parted harmlessly around Voldemort. It appeared Voldemort was right – he had barraged him with a wide assortment of all the spells he knew, short of the Unforgivables, but nothing had worked. Voldemort's words wormed themselves into Harry's thoughts.

"Avada—" Harry paused in the middle of the spell. If Voldemort was telling the truth, then he was a mere word away from ridding the world of the most powerful dark lord in centuries...but was he really willing to sell his soul to the killing curse? He thought back to some of the discussions he'd had with Bella about the killing curse. He'd wondered why it was considered an Unforgivable when other spells, most of which were actually considered harmless, were equally capable of killing people.

The reason was as simple as it was frightening. The first time someone cast the killing curse, they lost a piece of their soul. The same properties that allowed the spell to bypass any shield and kill any person would also slowly but inexorably cost the caster his soul. It certainly explained why Voldemort was who he was now, Harry thought grimly. Was he willing to go there to rid the world of Lord Voldemort? He had sworn that he would do anything to keep his family safe, but there was a flicker of a doubt.

Would he remain the same person? Would he go down the same path as Voldemort? Dumbledore had more than once alluded to the fact that they were both very similar. They had similar upbringings, similar experiences. A lot of people seemed to think that it wasn't a far cry for Harry to turn dark. Would this be it? Could just casting the spell a single time cause him to become the next Lord Voldemort? The prospect was a frightening one.

"Well?" Voldemort asked. "I am waiting. I thought you promised Bella and your child that you would never let me touch them," he taunted. "Unless you cast the killing curse, you will never defeat me. I'll keep coming back."

That thought slammed into Harry hard. The thought of Voldemort going after his wife and child was beyond anything he could bear, and he found himself saying the final word to the spell, taking care to enunciate it slowly so that there would be no chance for it to go wrong. Voldemort would die.

"Kedav-

"Don't do it, Harry!" Bella's voice surprised both of them, causing the dueling wizards to turn to look at the corridor. Bella and Hermione were there, having run down from the island's shore.

"Bella?" Harry asked in disbelief.

"We came as soon as we realized that Voldemort would be going after the Rod," she explained. "He wouldn't pass up such a chance to

get his hands on it while everyone else is fighting for their lives at the Ministry.”

Voldemort almost seemed to sigh in annoyance. “A perfectly good duel...ruined.”

“Shut up, Tom,” Harry snarled.

“Hermione? Bella? Harry?” A new voice chimed in. The two women at the entrance to the chamber turned around, surprised to see a battered Tonks leading Ginny at wandpoint. The redheaded girl whimpered pitifully.

“Voldemort,” Tonks snarled.

Harry had his black ash wand out and aimed at Tonks in an instant. “Let her go, Tonks.” He mentally kicked himself for not making sure Ginny had gotten away okay. He had been so caught up in getting to the Rod in time he’d left her alone – Tonks must have stumbled over Ginny...when exactly? Harry wondered. She must have infiltrated the castle, he realized, but something still didn’t add up.

“Harry, listen to me, Ginny’s the traitor,” Tonks explained. Hermione and Bella immediately drew their wands and aimed them at the youngest girl.

“Funny,” Harry growled. “She told me the same thing about you. How you cut up Fred and blasted away at George. How you kidnapped her and then let the Death Eaters have their fun with her.”

Hermione and Bella immediately pointed their wands at Tonks. The auror froze, her eyes wide in disbelief. “What? I wouldn’t do that! I’m on your side, Harry!”

“I thought so, too,” Harry hissed angrily. “Step away from her.” He eyed Voldemort out of the corner of his eye, wary that the dark wizard would try and kill him while his attention was elsewhere, but Voldemort seemed content to watch the spectacle unfolding before him with an unreadable expression.

Tonks reluctantly stepped away from her captive, raising her hands into the air. "You're making a mistake."

Bella had knelt down and was looking Ginny over, trying to make sure the girl was all right, as she knew a few minor healing spells. Hermione still had her wand trained on Tonks, and was eyeing the auror with distrust. "Give me your wand," the brunette ordered.

"What? Hermione, it's me, Tonks!"

"Give me your wand," Hermione repeated.

With a heavy sigh, Tonks handed the younger girl her wand. "You're making a big mistake here, Hermione. Please, listen to me! You've got to believe me, I didn't do it! It was Ginny, she caught us all by surprise! Hermione, remember, you'd just left the library when Harry came back? I wanted to check on the twins, and Ginny was there, she'd stabbed Fred and was casting some kind of dark spell at George. I tried to stop her, but she knocked me out – I woke up as Voldemort's captive!"

"Then how did you get away? How did you get a wand, hm?" Bella asked, glaring up at the auror. The raven-haired witch didn't like Ginny, not after she had heard how much the youngest Weasley had hurt Harry, but she couldn't help but feel sympathy for her as she examined Ginny's wounds. Bella only knew full well what Voldemort's idea of hospitality was. She'd been subjected to it a number of times, and she was supposed to be one of his followers.

"They brought me here. Ginny was holding me at knifepoint when they breached the outer defenses. When the ice soldiers started fighting back, we got separated from the Death Eaters. Some kind of explosive shell almost hit us, and knocked Ginny unconscious. I hid, and took the wand off one of the dead Death Eaters after they'd all left," Tonks explained.

"Then how come you didn't try to return to Nai'i'caix?" Harry asked. "You could've returned and warned us there. Why stay around here?"

Tonks looked Harry in the eyes. "Because I knew Voldemort was after the Rod. I knew we needed to stop him," she said sincerely.

Harry felt himself conflicted once more. But right now, they were in the perfect Mexican Standoff, as he'd heard Hermione call a situation before. He wasn't able to make a move that wouldn't leave him open. If he trusted either, there was a chance that the other was the traitor. He thought about using legilimency to probe into their thoughts, but at the first foray into Ginny's mind, he pulled back abruptly, stunned at the maelstrom of hurt, pain, and fear.

"What are you up to, Tom?" Harry muttered to himself. He had his answer when a pained cry came from behind him, followed by the discharge of a wand. He turned around, horrified to see Hermione blasted into the wall and slumped over, unconscious or dead, he couldn't tell. Tonks was struggling with Ginny for control of the wand she'd stolen from Bella, who was still shaking the cobwebs from her head at the sudden explosion. Before Harry could react to help them, Ginny twisted around, using the wand both she and Tonks held on to as a pivot. The redhead brought her back against Tonks's front, and executed a shoulder throw that sent the auror crashing to the ground. Before she could do anything more, though, Ginny was tackled from behind by Bella.

The older witch managed to dislodge the wand from Ginny's grasp by slamming her wrist against the marble floor, and pinned the smaller girl on the ground using her bodyweight. Pain blossomed from her belly, causing Bella to look down, just in time to see Ginny tear a dagger out of her wound. The redhead shoved the older witch off of her and leaned down, preparing to finish the job.

Chapter 47

By: Claihmsolais

Harry raised his wand, but found a shimmering barrier standing in between him and his wife. He whirled around, snarling at Voldemort. “What is this, Tom?”

“Simple, really. You turn your back on me, you die.” The dark wizard smirked. “We haven’t finished our duel yet.”

Gritting his teeth, Harry kicked the barely-visible barrier before him. It didn’t budge. He could only watch in horror as Ginny incapacitated Hermione and Tonks, and prepared to deliver the killing blow to his wife. He mentally kicked himself for not realizing it sooner. Ginny had supposedly portkeyed away to Nair’i’caix – he’d seen her disappear. There was no way Tonks would have been able to get to her. The only way this would have been possible was if Ginny hadn’t portkeyed to the fortress at all. She probably portkeyed to Voldemort, then went to fetch Tonks, but Tonks found her first and caught her. Damn! It was right under all of our noses!

To Harry’s immense relief, Tonks seized Ginny’s legs, causing the shorter girl to topple over. Both of them rolled to their feet. Harry tore his attention away from them and the large puddle of blood that was forming under Bella. Rage bubbled up within him, enough that he actually wanted to cast the killing curse, but he held himself back. He needed to get to Bella first. The hand holding on to his wand trembled. He didn’t even notice that Tonks had managed to disarm Ginny, and the two were now slugging it out with their fists and feet. He only saw the expanding puddle of red beneath his wife, feared for her life, feared for the life of their unborn child. He could see her weakly rolling around in the expanding puddle of her blood as she tried to stem the flow even as she went into shock.

“Let me out of here,” he snapped at Voldemort. “Let me take care of Bella first, then I’ll duel you.”

The dark wizard laughed. "Oh Harry, Harry, Harry. It doesn't work that way. You duel me now. You see, here's your situation: you don't have a choice. The only way you're going to get to your beloved Bella to save her is to defeat me first. That is, if you can defeat me." Voldemort glanced over to where Ginny and Tonks were brawling, their wands forgotten. "Oh, and if my little pet doesn't kill her first," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Rage flooded Harry's conscious mind, overriding any other thought in his mind as he realized Voldemort and Ginny could just very well have killed not only his wife, but their child, as well. He hurled the most powerful blasting curse he knew at the barrier, and the impact created an echoing boom in the cavern that shook the entire room from the power the shield had just dispelled. Fear was displaced by hatred, more intense than anything he'd ever felt in his life, far beyond the anger he felt at Voldemort for killing his parents, or for anything else the dark wizard had ever done to him.

"Avada Kedavra!" Harry spun around hurled the killing curse at Voldemort, who merely stood there and let the green bolt pass through him. It splashed harmlessly against the marble walls behind the dark wizard. "What?" Harry stared in disbelief. He could feel the aftermath of the curse, the absolute power singing through his veins. It had felt more powerful than any spell he'd ever cast before. The euphoria of casting it was so great that he almost forgot...almost forgot about his wife lying in her own blood on the cold marble floor, almost forgot about Voldemort and his insane ambition to rule the world.

Voldemort laughed. "You cannot kill me that easily anymore, Harry. I'm afraid I lied. The killing curse will not kill me. If you truly wish to destroy me, you will have to—"

The dark wizard cut off abruptly as Harry appeared in front of him and slugged him across the face. "Shut up," Harry hissed. "Shut up! Shut up!" He continued pounding away at Voldemort's body, uncaring that his knuckles were turning bloody or raw. He only cared about inflicting pain on Voldemort, and judging from the grunts of pain coming from the older man, he was succeeding.

“Enough!” A wave of power exploded from Voldemort, slamming into Harry and carrying him all the way to the barrier the dark wizard had conjured up around their makeshift dueling arena. Motes of light flared up, coalescing around Voldemort’s form as he began to glow. “Harry Potter,” he began, “now you meet your end.”

Harry stood, wiping the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. “If I’m going, I’ll take you down to hell with me, Tom.” He walked forward, until he stood just five paces away from his nemesis. “Let’s end this, Tom.”

“I agree, Harry.” Both of them stood still, Voldemort dissipating his shield. They both knew that this was it – they would go all out. There would be no more running around dodging spells and firing them off – they would be using the most powerful spells they knew, spells that had not been seen on this world for centuries. There would be no dodging those, and survival would depend entirely on who was more powerful. Harry had a vague idea why Voldemort was immune to the killing curse now. Voldemort was a warlock, much like Harry himself. How the dark wizard had acquired that kind of power was something Harry didn’t know, but he wouldn’t put it past him to use dark rituals.

Warlocks were able to visualize magic flows in space, Hiscophney had explained, mostly in the form of free-floating runes. The Trazkabanian sorcerers were those whose gift of magic was similar, he had explained, in that they directly manipulated magic without the need for a wand as an amplifier. In essence, a warlock was the ultimate mage, capable of forcing the magic to do anything and everything, simply by altering the patterns of the magic they could see.

During one of their discussions on runic magic, Hiscophney had hinted that a warlock, if powerful enough, could transcend the mortal plane and sever his soul, making him effectively invincible to the killing curse by destroying his mortal body and becoming an astral projection. It was a similar concept as to what he theorized that the Rod of Dominion did, tearing the soul free of the body, only that the Rod destroyed said souls afterwards. The only way to combat a warlock at that level, the Count had admitted, was to use spells that

warped reality itself. Only a warlock could kill a warlock. Battles between warlocks of that kind of power tended to be highly destructive, which was why the sorcerers had banned anyone from learning any of the warlock-grade spells. Hiscophney had admitted to having illegally learned one of the forbidden spells, and had provided Harry with the material to study the others. They both had hoped that it would never become necessary for Harry to learn them, but it seemed that the time had come.

Calling up on the forbidden magic that he had only read about thus far, Harry settled himself, clearing his mind. He hadn't dared practice these spells anywhere near others because of their destructive power, and even Hiscophney only had a vagues idea of how they worked. His vision cleared as he began to see lines of color floating around him. Runes floated in the air, just waiting for him to combine them in the correct patterns. He raised his wand, and began to cast spells he had never attempted before. Power flooded his veins, and a strange sense of understanding filled him as the world snapped into focus. He could feel the magic around him, instinctively knowing which lines did what...and he began forcing them into the patterns he had studied as a last resort.

“Awaken the song that speaks of empty sky...”

Voldemort mirrored his stance as the dark lord began his own spell.

“Hear the screams of the souls of the damned...”

Harry's brow furrowed in concentration as he mentally forced the runes to combine before him. He began to glow, much like Voldemort, as invisible lines of magic became visible, coalescing around him.

“Now harken ye the voice of the ocean's lord!”

A circle of light began expanding from around both of them as the runes flickered into visibility, forming patterns on invisible planes before both of them. Voldemort continued, undeterred.

“Answer my call, and unleash the fury of the abyss!”

Both brought their wands forward with a heave, and the two runic circles floating in the air before them slammed into each other.

“Tidal Wave!” Harry shouted.

“Bloody Curse!” was Voldemort’s answer. The two spells battled for dominance, causing a brilliant cascade of lightning to flare up where they met, bathing the room in blinding light. Wind howled in the underground cavern, tearing at their robes as they both pushed with all of their might. The space in between their spells distorted, flickering with an unearthly glow as reality itself was ripped to shreds. Waves of power washed across both of them, and the marble floor cracked and crumbled beneath their feet.

When it faded, the two combatants stood there, unharmed, but the tips of their wands were glowing with expelled power. Voldemort nodded in acknowledgement; for Harry to match a warlock spell was a feat even he acknowledged as impressive, but the young lord of Polairix looked winded. One more spell would finish him off. Voldemort began casting again.

“In the abyss, the trident of Hell’s Lord dances...”

Harry realized that he needed to keep going. He’d only been studying runic magic for a short time, with a lot of help from the Trazkabanian sorcerers, since they were more aware of it than wizards, but even they had limited themselves to a single runic spell, and even that spell was sealed away. He had completely underestimated the amount of sheer power and concentration it took to cast one of these spells, even though he knew that what he was casting was not even the perfect execution of the spell. He forced himself to keep going, struggling to remember the words that would help focus the powers.

“In my hand the Creator’s sword that calls eternal sleep!”

Purple light flickered to life in front of Voldemort, dancing in his eyes like flames.

“Dripping crimson truth lights the one true path!”

Red light flared up in front of Harry, and the marble floor ripped open around Voldemort, exploding flows of molten lava beneath. Columns of fire raced towards the dark lord as Harry continued his spell, forming a runic circle of flame beneath Voldemort’s feet.

“Honor our pact and hear my command!”

“Maleficent Harm!”

“Animate Earth!”

The ground around Voldemort exploded as Harry’s spell took effect, bolts of flame licked up angrily into the air. At the same time, a huge purple blast of magical energy erupted from underneath Harry. Both flew through the air, having been unable to shield themselves, and crashed to the ground. The marble floor was gone at the spot they’d stood at before, exposing angrily glowing lava beneath. Harry managed to stand first, clutching his broken ribs as he faced Voldemort. Realizing that now was his chance, before the dark wizard recovered, and he started another spell despite the drain on himself. His lungs burned as he forced air into them to form the words of the spell, every nerve in his body on fire from the energy he was channeling through it.

“Sapphire light burns deep into hell...”

Voldemort was picking himself off the floor when he heard the quiet chant. Not bothering to rise past his knees, he jutted out his wand.

“Harken the angel’s summon...”

Harry found himself staring up as a giant runic circle formed above him, a good twenty yards in diameter, slowly rotating, humming with barely restrained energy. The spell he was about to cast was the most powerful from the archives Hiscophney had given him access to, something that could be as lethal to the caster as it was to the target. The Count had hinted that this particular spell hadn’t ever been cast

since almost the time of Merlin. Usually, Harry would be reluctant to cast something that he could easily loose control over, but it was his best shot at ridding the world of Voldemort. He didn't care if it tore asunder the fabric of space, or if he warped time. All he wanted was for Voldemort to die.

“Witness their sins, and call forth the day of judgment!”

Voldemort looked up at a similar circle floating above his head, bathing him in a stark yellow glow. The dark lord smiled insanely as he conjured up the powers of the forbidden spell, intent on wiping Harry Potter from existence.

“The true path shall guide you, find peace in annihilation!”

“Pale Flare!” Violet bolts flashed from the circle above Harry’s head, curving around to slam into Voldemort’s unshielded body. He braced himself for the onslaught he knew was coming. He recognized Voldemort’s spell. It was the sister to his own.

“Phantom Destruction!” Yellow bolts of lighting crashed into Harry, driving his body all the way back to the wall as Voldemort’s barrier failed. The magically-reinforced marble crumbled around him, and all time seemed to stop as he contorted in agony. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t feel the blood rushing through his head. He couldn’t fall to the ground as the magic continued to spear into him, pushing into the marble until he was embedded into it. Their spells tore open reality, opened portals to other planes as they called forth untold amounts of power, power that wasn’t supposed to be handled by any human.

Their wands hummed and disintegrated under the strain as otherworldly lightning continued to cascade into both of them. The two runic circles connected, forming a cage around them as the world around flickered in and out of existence as the forces of nature tried to combat this defilement. Pale violet arcs fought with bright yellow lightning for dominance, causing a tear in reality to open up between Harry and Voldemort. It flared with unholy light, alternated with inconceivable darkness. It was as bright as the surface of the sun,

and as dark as the event horizon of a black hole. Thunder crashed and went unheard as nature was violated.

Then, suddenly, he crashed back into the real world as his body hit the floor. The barrage of the spells was over. Nature had sealed up the damage that had been caused, dissipating the energy the two had summoned from the higher planes by diverting it somewhere else. The tear in space was gone. So was the barrier around the Rod of Dominion, and the staff clattered to the torn ground, resting amidst the crumbled and crushed marble.

“I...I’m impressed,” Voldemort managed as the dark wizard lay slumped against the opposite wall, unable to get up. “I never...never expected you to master the highest levels of runic magic.”

Harry couldn’t find the breath to respond as he heaved for air, scrambling to rise. His arms wobbled, unable to support his weight, and he crashed back down to the ground. He absently realized that his wand was gone. That same part of his mind registered that he was still alive, which came as quite a surprise to him, considering that the final spells he and Voldemort had unleashed were quite capable of wiping entire islands from reality.

Both of them struggled for breath, unable to rise, and they both noticed the Rod of Dominion sitting on the ground in front of them, unguarded by the wards that had held them at bay. Voldemort smirked, realizing that his ploy had worked; shifting an object from a higher plane to theirs required immense amounts of energy, something that could only be found in warlock spells that were capable of tearing asunder the natural order of things. Even he would not be able to generate the necessary power by himself. Goading his opponent into casting the required spells and matching them with a spell of equal power had caused the Rod to shift back into three-dimensional space from where it had been, when reality had been warped by their colliding spells. Voldemort had no intention of destroying reality – after all, if everything was gone, what was there to rule over?

Harry realized what Voldemort was thinking, and forced his sore muscles to move. They spasmed erratically, and he could only drag

himself along the broken floor at a snail's pace. The only consolation was that he knew Voldemort was in a similar condition. The only reason either of them were still alive was because neither had the required knowledge or control over the spell to bring them to completion, something Harry was glad for. A Voldemort with complete control over spells that could create black holes and tears in reality capable of swallowing up entire islands was not a pleasant thought.

Almost there....almost....Harry thought as he reached a shaking hand towards the Rod that was now only a few inches away from his fingertips. He could touch it...tried to wrap his fingers around it, but the Rod slipped away and towards Voldemort. No! he thought as the dark wizard reached for the staff that was now within arm's reach. No, please, not after all we've been through, not like this!

A foot came down on the staff before either of them could get their hands on it. Their eyes travelled up a booted foot, up the tattered robes, and to the head. Voldemort smirked as he extended his hand towards the woman. She reached down and picked up the Rod, looking at it closely, her quizzical gaze wandering from the artifact to Voldemort and back.

Harry wanted to scream in frustration. He'd forgotten about Ginny and Tonks. Now that Ginny was holding the Rod...

Voldemort smirked as Ginny turned to hand him the Rod of Dominion. It was over, he had won. Harry didn't have the energy to stand, much less cast any spells. Suddenly, the redheaded girl collapsed to the ground, the staff rolling from her limp hands to the side where neither Harry nor Voldemort could get to it.

"About damn time she went down," Tonks muttered as she lowered the broken piece of wood she'd used to knock out Ginny.

"What are you doing to my sister!" a male voice shouted from the entrance, causing everyone who was left conscious to look over. A cadre of wizards stood in the archway, led by Kingsley Shacklebolt and Severus Snape. Behind them were a few members of the Legion, and, to Harry's utter disgust, Ron Weasley and his parents. Before

anyone else could react, Ron had his wand up and blasted Tonks with a bludgeoning hex that sent the auror crashing to the ground and coughing up blood.

“Weasley!” Shacklebolt yelled, only to have the redhead run ahead and kick the downed Harry in the side.

Harry rolled with the blow, grunting at the pain as the older wizards caught up with Ron and pulled him away before he could do anything more than sneer at him in contempt. “Voldemort, Bella,” Harry managed to mumble, and Snape immediately understood.

The potions master sent several of the wizards to round on the dark wizard, casting binding and immobilizing spells on him, while Snape himself left to tend to Bella. Harry caught his breath and looked around for the Rod, but one of the witches in the group had gotten a hold of it before he’d even spotted the black staff. The woman glanced at the staff for a moment, before looking over at Harry and grinning maliciously. The young lord of Polairix swore under his breath when he recognized her as Madame Arretha, the witch who’d confronted him two days ago when they were planning for the siege and had discovered there was a traitor among them.

“So this is the weapon you talked about, eh, Potter?” she mused with thinly veiled amusement, catching everyone’s attention. “A weapon capable of destroying the most powerful dark wizard in centuries. It doesn’t look like much.” She shrugged, then levelled the staff at him.

“We ought to test it,” she said with a grin full of malice. Ron stood behind her, nodding in agreement.

“Right, now that we have it, we can get rid of both of them,” the redhead agreed.

Harry snorted. “You’re kidding me, right?” It took some effort, but he managed to get to his feet, albeit shakily. “First of all, you have no idea how it works, so it’s not like you can use it right now, so just give it to me and let me kill ole Tom there, and be done with it.”

“Who said anything about using it right now?” Madame Arretha sneered. “We’re taking you into custody, Harry Potter. You will be held in prison until such a time that the manner of your execution has been determined.”

“On whose authority?” Harry sneered back.

“Mine, and the Order of the Phoenix,” she replied confidently.

“Yeah, right,” Harry spat. “That Order of yours isn’t even a legal organization, much less one with the authority to make arrests and issue punishments.” He flicked his wrist, causing his black ash wand to slip into his hand from his holster. “Besides, if you want to take me, you’ll have to take me by force.”

“That can be arranged.” On her command, every single wizard and witch in the room turned their wands on Harry, forming a circle around him, Snape, the bound Voldemort, and Shacklebolt.

“What is the meaning of this, woman?” Snape bellowed.

Madame Arretha glared at the potions master. “It is simple, Severus. You are all hereby taken into custody, for charges of illegal black magic, murder, conspiracy to commit murder, treason to the wizarding world, and crimes of war.”

“Crimes of war? Are you kidding me?” Shacklebolt shouted incredulously. “Have you lost your mind, Madame?”

“Silence!” the woman slapped him across the face. “You have sided with the traitor, Harry Potter. Therefore, you are as guilty as he is.”

A low chuckle could be heard from the ground, and everyone turned to look at Voldemort, who was laughing. “You see, Harry, this is the thanks you get.”

“Yeah,” the black-haired teenager muttered, “I’m starting to wish I’d let you wipe them out. This is getting annoying.”

“There is still time for that, you know,” Voldemort taunted.

Harry looked like he was considering it for a moment before shaking his head. “Look, this is getting stupid. Give me the goddamn staff so I can kill Tom here, then we can all go our merry ways.”

Ron laughed. “What do you take us for? Idiots? If we give you the staff, you’ll just kill us all after you kill him,” he nudged Voldemort.

“Well, yeah, you’re sure acting like a moron,” Harry muttered under his breath. Out loud he said, “Shouldn’t you worry about Dumbledore first? The old man’s been knocked out over there.” He gestured in the general direction and frowned. Thinking of Dumbledore made him think of Hermione and Bella. Bella! He needed to make sure she was all right. I haven’t got time for this, he thought irritably.

“The headmaster is of no concern. I lead the Order now,” Madame Arretha declared haughtily.

“Oh yeah, really getting sick of you now,” Harry muttered. “Look, get out of my way, or get hurt. It’s your call.”

“Ha! You can barely stand, Potter, how do you expect to take on all of us?” Ron smirked, his wand held on Harry.

Like this, Harry replied silently, mustering his remaining strength to pull off one last spell. He quietly muttered the words to himself. “Blazing light, shatter strength forged hard in hellfire...Sublime Horn!”

A vortext of purple light flared into existence all around Harry, hurling the people standing around him into the air and scattering them all across the room. He stood quietly in the eye of the storm, breathing heavily from the exertion, along with Snape and Shacklebolt. The two older wizards eyed him in wide-eyed surprise, in awe at the power of the spell even as drained as he was. The blast subsided as quickly as it had appeared, dropping the Order wizards out of the air and onto the hard marble floor. Bones cracked and broke from the impacts, but

Harry couldn't bring himself to care. All he wanted was for it all to end so he could go home with Bella.

Walking through the carnage he'd caused, he picked up the Rod of Dominion. Looking around for Voldemort, he kicked himself when he realized that his attack had also blasted the dark wizard away, and most likely dissipated any magic bonds the wizards had put on him. "Impressive, Harry," Voldemort's voice came from behind him. Harry spun around, spotting the dark wizard standing a few feet behind him.

"You know the prophecy, right?" Harry asked.

"Yes, though the same thing you told that Order hag applies to you...you have no idea how to unlock the Rod's true power," Voldemort answered calmly.

"Really," Harry gritted his teeth. All he really wanted was to run over to Bella and make sure she was all right. He could feel she was still alive through the bond they shared, which calmed him down somewhat, but he could feel she was weakening. And he had no idea what had happened to their child. The wound probbaly wasn't fatal, he realized, but blood loss may kill her anyway. He glared up at his nemesis. "And here I thought I'd just hold it up and think something like, 'Die, Tom,' and you'd drop dead."

Voldemort laughed. "You still have not realized it? That staff is more than just a powerful tool, or a weapon. It is a key to the universe itself. Without it, warlocks can tear holes into space, tear asunder reality...but that only lasts for a short time before nature reverses the damage. With the Rod...you control reality. When you rip into space, the hole remains. When you tear apart this dimension, it will not heal. You can create your own universe, or destroy this one, because with the Rod, nature will not interfere. That is the true power of the Rod."

"W-what?" Harry froze, unable to comprehend what Voldemort had just told him. "You're delusional!"

"Hardly, Harry," the dark wizard smirked. "Think of it. The Rod was suspended in its own dimensional pocket. It took both of us and our

combined spells to tear reality apart for just an instant – just long enough for the Rod to fall back into our reality. Why do you think it has remained suspended there for all these centuries when any damage we did, any tears we caused, were healed almost instantly?” Voldemort threw out his hands, causing a cage of golden lightning to arc around and enclose him and Harry.

Magic crackled as the entire area around them shifted into tones of grey. Time seemed to slow down and finally stopped, just before everything faded to black, leaving the two adversaries floating in a see of nothingness, surrounded by a golden cage. “I just shifted us into another plane,” Voldemort explained. “That is what the proximity of the Rod will allow me to do. Once I hold it...”

Harry glanced around, staring at the absolute blackness around them. “So, what happens if nature kicks in and seals the hole you’ve created, Tom?”

“We would be trapped here, for all eternity,” Voldemort replied with a toothy grin. “On the other hand, here we can finally finish our duel.”

Harry arched an eyebrow. “I don’t think so, Tom.” He raised the Rod and pointed it at Voldemort. “It’s over.”

“You can’t kill me, Harry,” Voldemort told him. “Remember? The killing curse will not affect me.” He smirked arrogantly. “Besides, do you really want to do these unworthy idiots in the wizarding world the favor?”

Harry shook his head. “I’m not doing them the favor, Tom. I’m doing it for myself. For everything you’ve taken from me, for everything you would take from me if I let you live. For everything you’ve taken from those willing to stand up to you.”

“Not so noble now, are we?” Voldemort commented in amusement, seemingly unbothered by the fact that Harry now held the Rod of Dominion.

"No," Harry conceded. "That was something you taught me...selfishness. And you know what? Thanks. You showed me who my true friends were. That was probably the only good thing you've ever brought to my life."

The dark wizard crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Go ahead, then. Strike me down. Satisfy your need for revenge. Let me see all the hate you have for me." He bared his teeth in a feral snarl. "Show me how much you hate me for killing your parents. Show me how much you hate me for causing your godfather's death! Show me how much you despise me for your lost childhood!"

Harry gripped the Rod tightly in his hands, his knuckles white. He carefully recited the words to the final warlock spell he'd learned. "Awaken, lord of the four treasures, sealed since the origin of time. Let my strength be the sword of the oppressed...Spiritual Lancer!"

The staff in his hands elongated and widened until he held a two-sided spear, each blade four feet long, tapering from the tip to twelve inches wide, separated by a short shaft that he was holding on to. With a cry full of all the anger he felt, Harry lunged forward, impaling Voldemort on the weapon, piercing straight through the dark wizard's torso. The bladed tip emerged from the other side, but Voldemort still stood. The non-existing ground underneath them erupted into a brilliant blue sphere and three ethereal spears slammed upwards, impaling Voldemort's body. Harry took a deep, shuddering breath before he looked up, confused and surprised to see the dark wizard still standing.

"Well, it appears you have what it takes, after all," he said in amusement. "It is just too bad that you are there alone." With that, Voldemort's figure faded, as did the golden cage, leaving Harry in perfect darkness.

Chapter 48

By: Claihmsolais

Harry looked around the darkness all around him. He felt like he was floating, despite the fact that he was standing on an invisible floor. Out beyond the shimmering golden cage, he could see nothing. The blackness was as infinite as it was perfect, and there would be no way he could orient himself on anything. He glanced down at the staff in his hands that now seemed to be pulsing with energy, then at the empty space around him. He knew he was alone here, and he could almost feel the invisible pressure from the forces of nature as they tried to seal the tear in space he was in. A pocket dimension, Hermione would most likely call it, a hole in the fabric of space-time where there should be none, a place where time had no meaning, because it existed outside of reality.

He briefly wondered if Voldemort had planned on leaving him there forever, then realized that the dark wizard would either return, or retrieve Harry, because he wanted the Rod of Dominion. That realization gave Harry some measure of ease, because as long as he held on to the Rod, Voldemort would return. But he couldn't wait for his archenemy forever – his wife and unborn child needed him. Suppressing the anger he felt at Voldemort, Harry calmed himself and tried to approach the situation logically.

Voldemort had used a spell to transport him there, so there had to be a way to get back. Harry jabbed the staff in his hands at the glowing cage around him, staring intently as tendrils of golden light wrapped around the smooth wood. He could almost feel a connection to the weapon as the lightning reached his hands where he held on to the Rod of Dominion. Reaching deep within himself, the young wizard tapped his connection to the warlock rune, turning the gift that allowed him to manipulate the fabric of reality onto himself. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he forced the area of space around himself to warp to shift him back, but with a tortured groan, the attempt failed and he fell backwards, the connection between the staff and Voldemort's spell lost.

Sitting up, Harry nearly slumped back down when his body was wracked with a violent series of coughs that left his hands bloody. “Damn,” he muttered, looking down at the blood from his lungs that now covered the front of his robes and hands. He had a good idea what had caused the sudden attack; channeling too much magical power through a human body was much like a surge of electricity going through it. Regular wizards didn’t have much of a problem with it, but sorcerers and warlocks were capable of using much more powerful spells – spells that most archmages were hard-pressed to match.

Count Hiscophney and Bella had both warned him that excessive use of his magical powers would eventually harm his body, but in his duel with Voldemort, Harry hadn’t really cared. Killing the dark lord was more important than worrying about damage to his body, and, though Bella found it hard to agree with that statement, she knew that he was right. Harry had believed he had been fine until now, and just the fact that the magical backlash from whatever spell Voldemort had cast on him to shift him out of reality had hurt him this much was an indication of just how truly powerful the dark wizard had become.

Harry slowly rose to his feet, careful to keep his hands away from the edges of the cage this time. “Damn,” he repeated, “we throw enough power at each other to rip a hole in space-time, and we’re fine. Then he sticks me in a cage and it knocks me over flat.” That statement may have been a bit exaggerated, because Harry knew that the spells he and Voldemort had hurled at each other had had at least some effect on his body; not all of the aches and pains he felt were from being electrocuted, or slammed into a marble wall.

How the hell can he use so much power and not even bat an eye? Harry wondered silently. How can he throw around so much energy and not be affected?

The answer came to him a moment later. Voldemort had no physical body anymore. Because he had transcended the bonds of his mortal form and effectively become an immortal astral projection of his spirit, bound to no object or living organism, he could toss around as much energy as he wanted, because he was energy. Harry’s heart sank. That meant the only way of destroying Voldemort would mean either

entrapping him in a dimensional space much like the one Harry was in, or somehow binding Voldemort's "soul" to an object so that it could be destroyed. In order to kill Voldemort, he would have to be made human again.

The realization chilled Harry to the bone, because as he looked around himself, watching the interplaying patterns of runes and colored lines float about him, he realized just how much knowledge and experience Voldemort must have accumulated to be able to craft such a complex and powerful spell. It wasn't something he could duplicate, not in any reasonable amount of time. But that meant somehow tying Voldemort's spiritual essence to something...and Harry wasn't particularly sure of how to accomplish that one, either.

The Rod...you control reality. When you rip into space, the hole remains. When you tear apart this dimension, it will not heal. You can create your own universe, or destroy this one, because with the Rod, nature will not interfere. That is the true power of the Rod. Voldemort's words echoed in Harry's mind as his eyes went to the staff in his hands.

I don't get it, he thought. How does it do that? Why doesn't it let me get out of here? If it can control reality, then shouldn't I be able to get out of here? He fingered the long, smooth staff, knowing that he was missing something. Voldemort couldn't have been stupid enough to imprison Harry with the only tool in existence that could get him out...could he? Did Voldemort know something about the staff's function that Harry didn't?

Frowning, Harry turned his inner eye on the Rod again, trying to carefully decipher the layers of runes and spells that it had been enchanted with. He pushed past the outer layer, past all of its defensive enchantments, but before he could go any further, a jolt of pain went through his body, causing Harry to collapse on the ground. All of his nerves burned for an instant before it faded, and when it was gone, Harry sat up, but the darkness around him had been replaced with bright, white light.

"Great, first everything's black, then everything's white," he muttered, not really concerned with his surroundings. What was more important

to him was the fact that he could now see runes and spell patterns without having to try. A deep sense of understanding filled him as he realized he could simply look at one particular patterns and instinctively understand its functions, as if all of the knowledge of the universe was at his command. The feeling was as exhilarating as it was frightening. By accident, he stared at the patterns of Voldemort's spell, and a deluge of knowledge filled his mind, so much that he panicked as it overwhelmed him.

A few moments later, he was breathing heavily, having managed to clear his mind of everything that had accidentally come to him, but he was left with one piece of knowledge that he had held on to through it all. The Rod was tied to whoever wielded it.

~*~*~*~*~*

Voldemort smirked as he stood in the room as the only person who was still conscious. After he had tricked Harry into his pocket dimension, knocking out Snape and Shacklebolt was easy enough. He snorted in disgust. The Order with their stupidity in holding up Harry had given him enough time to regain his strength. He was impressed, though, that Harry, wounded as he was, had managed to fire off one last spell capable of taking out the Order. He kicked at their unconscious forms. They truly were useless...more than useless, in fact, because instead of helping, they made matters worse for Harry. Deep down, Voldemort couldn't help but feel disappointed. The duel between him and Harry was something he had been looking forward to; now it would most likely never be finished, because of their interference. He snorted, tempted to kill them all right now, but he decided to let them be. They would die eventually.

The only problem he now had was that Harry still held the Rod. However, Voldemort was confident that the boy would not escape from his dimensional prison. The pocket plane itself would not collapse as long as it was sustained by the Rod of Dominion. He had no intention of letting Harry die in there, however...but he needed time to gain a bargaining chip. The lives of his friends and his wife would do nicely, Voldemort decided, which was the reason they were all still alive. Most of them, anyway. Bella was just barely breathing, something that gave Voldemort both great pleasure and a feeling of

disappointment. Bella had been one of his most promising followers, a truly twisted and sadistic individual who relished pain, and relished inflicting it on others even more. She had been wonderful, killing, torturing, and coming up with ever-creative ways of keeping her victims alive to feel the pain.

And then, almost as if a switch had been flipped, her cousin's death had turned off her psychosis. It snapped her back to reality, and Voldemort was disgusted at himself for not having seen her betrayal from the moment they had left the Ministry that fateful year. It was a waste of a perfectly good sociopath. He stared down at her curled up form.

"A pity, Bella. We were so good together."

"Screw you," she whispered hoarsely, regaining consciousness.

A cold shudder went through him, as if part of his soul had just been severed when she glared at him, but he ignored it, turning around to mutter a spell that would bring Harry back. A few seconds later, the glowing golden cage reappeared with Harry inside. The teenager was gritting his teeth, but remained silent. Voldemort spread his arms and gestured around the room.

"Now, Harry, we can do this the easy way...or I can kill them all, and you as well, and take the Rod."

"You're just going to kill us all anyway, right? So what's the point?"

Voldemort seemed to genuinely consider that for a moment. "You'll be saving yourself some pain," he finally answered with a shrug.

Harry took two steps forward, then tossed the Rod at Voldemort. The dark wizard caught the staff easily, and nodded. "Wise choice.'

" You know, Tom," Harry began, "there's really something you should know."

"Oh? What's that?"

“It’s about something you told me, really. You remember how you said the Rod of Dominion basically allows you to control reality?”

“Yes...what about it?” Voldemort asked, genuinely curious as to what Harry was referring to.

“Well, it turns out that in order to give you the power, it’s got to anchor your soul.” Harry pulled his right hand from beneath his cloak, revealing a muggle handgun. “Now that you’re holding it...goodbye, Tom.”

Voldemort’s eyes were wide with surprise when Harry pulled the trigger, and the dark wizard’s body flew backwards from the impact of the four bullets. Standing over his enemy, Harry looked down into his still face, expression still frozen into surprise and pain. Just to make sure Voldemort was really dead this time, he emptied the rest of the rounds into his body, before incinerating it with a quickly muttered fire spell.

Once he was sure Voldemort was dead, Harry dropped the gun, letting it clatter to the floor as he knelt next to Bella. The adrenaline faded, causing him to almost collapse on top of her. “Enervate,” he muttered, bringing her fully awake as he looked at her wound.

“H-Harry?”

“Shh. It’s okay, I’m here,” he whispered to her. “Stay still, I’m going to try and stem the bleeding.” He quickly tore off strips from his robes and pressed them to the gash in her side. Taking a longer strip, he tied it around her waist as a tourniquet. He couldn’t help but glance down at the large puddle of blood underneath her, and hoped that he wasn’t too late. From the moment she’d been stabbed until now only a few minutes had passed, but with his focus entirely on killing Voldemort, it had seemed like a small eternity.

“H-how did we do?” she asked weakly.

“Don’t talk. Save your strength.” He lifted her head into his lap, unable to do much more. Now that the battle was over, he felt each and every one of his injuries...including the broken ribs and the broken left arm. And that wasn’t even considering that every single one of his nerves felt like it was on fire, and that his muscles were torn and hurt from the energy that had coursed through them when he’d been hit with Voldemort’s spells. He didn’t think he had the strength to stand, much less support his wife. And since he’d given his emergency portkey to Ginny...

Bella glanced over at the ashes that was all that remained of Voldemort. “You did it,” she said quietly.

“Yeah...yeah, I did.” Harry looked down into her eyes. “I’m sorry, Bella. I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have left you. I’m sorry I wasn’t there when you needed me.”

She grasped on to his wrist. “You did what you had to. He didn’t give you a choice.” She smiled weakly. “And you’re here now, that’s what matters.”

“Bella...I-I don’t think I can get us out of here.” He left unsaid that she needed medical attention, and quickly. A cough racked his body, and when he pulled his hand away, he grimaced when he saw the blood that was splattered all over it.

“My portkey,” Bella informed him, “in my robes. Left side.”

Harry reached into her robe and quickly found pocket. When he pulled it out, though, he’d come up empty. “You must’ve lost it in the fight.” He looked around the chamber to see if he could spot anything, and spied a speck of silver not too far away. When he summoned it, though, he grimaced at the molten and twisted piece of silver that refused to react to his commands.

“Looks like it got caught in the spells we were throwing around,” he told her. He spotted the Rod laying discarded among Voldemort’s remains and reached over, a crazy idea forming in his head. “Tear a

hole in reality, eh?" he muttered as he forced his magic to work one last time.

Then the world turned black.

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"He's a lucky fella, that's for sure."

"The man's got nine lives, I tell ya."

"Must be part leprechaun."

Harry blinked as he slowly came back to consciousness. Blurred shapes formed in front of his eyes as he forced them open. It wasn't too terribly bright – from the light coming in through the curtained windows, he assumed it must be shortly after sunrise. Then he recognized the voices.

"Luck has nothing to do with it, brother dearest, the man's got skills," Fred commented.

"No, it's luck...definitely luck," Harry muttered as he fumbled around for his glasses.

"Ah, he wakes!" George grinned broadly. "Welcome back to the land of the living, yer majesty!"

"Ooh...my head's killing me," Harry mumbled as he sat up, experiencing a sudden bout of vertigo.

"Get the man a bucket!" George cheerily announced, to which his twin brother immediately produced one.

"There ya go, mate."

Harry took the bucket and promptly emptied the contents of his stomach into it. When there was nothing left to empty, he let himself fall back onto the bed. "What happened?" he asked hoarsely.

Fred and George looked at each other. "We don't really know," George finally admitted, "we only woke up yesterday."

Before Harry could ask another question, the door to the infirmary of Nair'i'caix opened, admitting Snape, Moody, Tonks, Count Hiscophney, and Hermione. The five clustered around Harry's bed when they realized he was awake and peppered him with questions. Well, Tonks and Hermione did. Snape, and Hiscophney were stoic as ever, though one could swear there was a hint of concern in their eyes. Moody merely watched the entire spectacle with a bemused grin, before clapping Harry on the shoulder hard enough that the boy winced in pain.

"Good one, Potter. You had us scared there for a while, but it seems you've pulled through yet again." Moody grinned.

"What happened?" Harry repeated, causing the seven people around his bed to look at each other. Harry noted that two people were conspicuously absent. "Where's Bella? And General Rotan?"

After a long pause, Moody grumbled and took it upon himself to answer the question. "Well, Potter, your wife's going to be fine. She's still recovering."

"She is? How is she? How's the baby?" Harry tried to rise from the bed again, only to find himself pushed back on by the grizzled old auror. He turned his head around as the memories returned. "Oh god, she got stabbed...the baby..."

"Yes. Over that way," Moody gestured towards a curtained bed at the other end of the room. "They are both fine. She was just as lucky as you, that blade missed most of her vitals, and it missed the child. They're both safe. As for the General...well..."

"General Rotan did not make it off the battlefield," Snape finished, a tone of regret in his voice.

“What? How did that happen?” Harry felt an immense sense of relief that his wife and child were safe, so much so that he felt a little guilty for not feeling as bad as he probably should have that the General was gone.

“They made their stand long enough for us to pull back and into the building,” Hiscophney explained, “and he and his men guarded the entrance until everyone was inside. They were overwhelmed by sheer numbers. We were able to hold the building, but by the time we had gotten the heavy cannons operating again, it was too late.”

“I think we better start from the beginning,” Moody rumbled.

Snape and Moody exchanged a quick look. “When you left the battle, the goblin reinforcements allowed our northern and central flanks to fall back far enough to reconnect with Rotan’s southern flank. Once there, we realized that despite the help from the goblins, standing our ground outside would be almost impossible, so we decided to retreat into the building, to the inner defenses,” the potions master recounted. “Rotan volunteered his regiment to cover our retreat.”

“Once we gave up the northern cannons, we were overrun,” Hiscophney added. “The ice people’s weapons were the only thing keeping Voldemort’s forces from rolling all over us, and once we fell back, we no longer had the weapons emplacements.”

Moody nodded in agreement. “That was another reason we decided to get everyone inside. The Count here had his people set up the weapons inside so that we could take out anything that came through the door. Once the enemy realized that we were falling back, they came at us like bloodhounds after a wounded animal.”

“They overran all of our sentries, crushed our frontline, and forced us almost to the doorway.” Snape looked grim. “We lost several hundred people just from that. Rotan was one of them. He led a counterattack that bought us just enough time to bring the weapons to bear.”

“How many did we loose?” Harry asked, unsure as to whether he really wanted to know the answer.

Moody shook his head. “We haven’t counted all of the dead yet, but I’d estimate there’s at least four thousand. Sixty percent of our forces are gone.”

Harry was silent. He had expected losses, of course, but now that the fighting was over, and he realized the staggering loss of life that had been caused by just that one battle, he couldn’t help but feel a rising sense of overwhelming guilt. “Dear lord...” he whispered.

“Voldemort’s forces didn’t get off scot-free, either,” Moody told him. “They were almost entirely wiped out before they retreated. They never made it past the inner defenses, once we got them up.”

Like that’s any consolation, Harry thought bitterly. Four thousand people were dead because of him and his decision to fight it out with Voldemort. He shuddered involuntarily. He couldn’t even imagine that number of dead bodies. Four thousand, that was the entire contingent the Ice people had brought to his aid. Just imagining all of them dead made him sick to his stomach.

“The goblins?” Harry licked his dry lips, trying to get rid of the lump in his throat.

“They got off pretty well. Lost a few ships, but since they were behind Voldemort’s troops, they managed to dish out a whole lot more than they took.” Snape replied. “Once we knew the fighting was under control, I took a number of people to go to Azkaban. You know what happened ten.”

“Yeah...” Harry paused for a moment, before looking over at Tonks. The auror had been quiet up until now. “How are you, Tonks?”

“Fine. Ron packs one heck of a punch when he wants to.” Tonks managed a weak smile. “I’m sorry I went missing so often, Harry. I really am...but Dumbledore told me that it was important. We needed

to flush out the traitor." She shrugged. "Too bad we were tracking the wrong one."

"I'm sorry for doubting you. If I hadn't, then—"

Tonks waved him off. "You were right in doing so. For all you knew, I may have been the traitor, instead of Ginny."

"How is Ginny, anyway? Anyone ever figure out what happened to her?" Harry asked, his tone suddenly a few degrees colder.

"Voldemort put a very obscure, very old compulsion charm on her," Snape replied with a heavy frown. "We assume that she went out snooping around some of the seized Death Eater properties back when the Minister gave the order, and was caught then. We found traces of an erased memory that seem to confirm that theory. We purged the spell from her, not that it matters, since the dark lord is dead."

"Yeah...about that..." Harry began. "Are we really sure he's really dead this time?"

Snape and Moody looked at each other, unable to answer. Hiscophney shrugged and withdrew his hand from under his cloak, handing Harry the Rod of Dominion. "Considering the fact that you were holding this when we found you, and that his body is a pile of ashes, I assume it would be safe to say that he is quite dead."

"Dead as a doornail," Fred grinned.

"Dead as the Flungarian Waltz, even," George added.

"We found you unconscious down in the lower levels of Azkaban," Hiscophney continued. "Along with everyone else." He left unsaid that had they come a few minutes later, Harry or Bella most likely would not have survived.

"So...how long was I out this time?" Harry asked.

“Four days,” Moody told him. “Considering the condition you were in, it’s a minor miracle you’re awake yet.”

“What do you mean? Bella was much worse off than me.”

“Nope,” Moody shook his head. “Sure, it may have looked bad, but her wound missed all of her organs. She was suffering from blood loss more than anything else. You, on the other hand, were a right mess.”

“Odd...I didn’t feel like a mess.” At least not until the end, Harry mentally amended.

“Well, you were, Potter,” Snape smirked. “Four broken ribs, a punctured lung, shattered tibia and femur, broken collarbone, shattered elbow, broken wrist, internal bleeding, high-degree burns, extensive nerve and tissue damage...I would say that you have broken your own record for injuries sustained during a single day, Potter.”

Harry was about to retort when he caught sight of the faint smile crossing the potions master’s face. It was gone before Harry could be sure. Snape, smiling? Naaah. Harry chalked it up to hallucinations. He thought for a few moments. Bella was safe, which was a relief. Now that he could finally clear his head from the medication and unconsciousness, he could feel her presence, and true to Moody’s word, she wasn’t far away, peacefully asleep. Voldemort was dead...really dead this time. Deep down, he could feel it. It was as if a weight had been lifted from his soul. There was no rational explanation for it, except maybe the connection between them through his scar, that let him feel Voldemort’s death. Reaching up to brush his hair aside, his fingers found smooth, unblemished skin. The scar was gone. So was Voldemort.

“That reminds me, Potter,” Moody said, pulling a muggle gun from his cloak. “What by Merlin’s beard is this thing?”

Harry blinked at the old auror, taking a moment to wrap his head around the question. “Uh...it’s a gun, Moody. You know, to shoot people with?”

“Gun?” The auror queried, a puzzled look on his face.

“It’s like a crossbow,” Hermione came to Harry’s rescue. “Only it doesn’t need to be reloaded as often, and fires bullets instead of arrows. It uses a chemical charge to...” she trailed off with a blush as she realized that she had been about to get carried away. “Anyway,” she said, clearing her throat, “that’s about it. Though where Harry got one, I don’t know.”

“General Rotan gave it to me,” Harry told them. “The Ice people make weaponry very similar to muggles. He gave it to me as a backup, just in case I ever needed it. Just like most Ice soldiers carry one along with their swords. I didn’t actually think I’d have to use it.” He looked down at the finely-crafted weapon. The chrome-polished barrel gleamed in the early morning sun, revealing exquisite detailing along its length. The weapon tapered off into an ivory-plated grip and curved trigger that made it seem like it was more an object of art than a tool of war.

“Thanks, General,” Harry muttered quietly.

“You want to tell us what happened on your front, Potter?” Moody finally asked. He and everyone else wondered just what had transpired that had ended in Voldemort being reduced to a pile of ash and Harry and Bella being in the condition they had found them in.

“ Sure...” Harry took a deep breath and laid out his final confrontation with the dark lord.

Chapter 49

By: Claihmsolais

The days following the final battle with Voldemort's forces were characterized by a flurry of activity. The wizarding world was eager to rebuild, while Harry helped the ice people and the Trazkabanian sorceres to honor and bury their dead. Bella had woken up on the same day that Harry had; her injury was quickly mended, and the doctors had merely let her sleep to let the blood-replenishing potion they had given her do its work.

Those Death Eaters and dark creatures who were left alive after the battle at the Ministry were taken into custody and transported over to Azkaban, where Captain Nailoff and his regiment of soldiers once more turned the fortress into a prison. They would remain there until such a time that arrangements with the Ministry of Magic could be made. And when all was said and done, it all came down to numbers. Numbers on a report that Harry was given, and that he had forwarded to Cuthbert Mockridge. Numbers he was still staring at as he sat in his office unmoving.

Ten-thousand, six hundred and twenty-seven: The number of dark creatures killed, including Dementors, giants, werewolves, vampires, and others.

Four-hundred and eleven: The number of enemies captured.

Two-thousand, three hundred, and nine: The number of injured.

And five thousand, one-hundred, and sixteen: The number of dead ice soldiers, aurors, sorcerers, and goblins who had fought at his side.

That last one had him nauseous for days.

Now that most of the cleanup was done and everyone was busy going back to their lives before the war, there were only a few last things to take care of. Harry stood up and left the room when the clock chimed. Today was the day that they would be waking up Frank and Alice Longbottom. Neville was waiting for him outside his door,

and quickly fell into step with Harry as they made their way down to the medical ward. Bella was waiting for them when they arrived, a flask of silvery liquid in her hand.

“You ready?” Harry asked. The question was directed at Bella as much as it was at Neville.

Neville paused, looking at his parents’ still forms. “Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Bella carefully dripped the potion down into the Longbottoms’ mouths before setting the flask on a nearby table. “Now all we can do is wait,” she announced.

Almost three hours later, the Longbottoms began to stir. The nurse who was monitoring them immediately called Bella and Harry. Neville was still in the room, sitting with his parents, when Harry entered. Bella had decided to wait outside, and Harry had agreed that it would be for the best. She had come a long way from the dark witch who had been Voldemort’s right-hand woman, but the Longbottoms didn’t know that. Yet, Harry amended silently. He looked on from the sidelines as Neville and the nurse gently coaxed Frank and Alice Longbottom out of their decade-long coma.

“Hey, Dad, Mom,” Neville whispered, a broad smile on his face as their eyes blinked open. He flitted from one bed to the next, turning his head around to alternate looking at his mother and father.

“Wh-where am I?” Frank Longbottom croaked, his voice raspy. The nurse quickly held up a glass of water for him, and he sipped through the proffered straw greedily.

“You’re in Nair’i’caix,” Neville explained.

“Neville?” his father seemed to just have realized who he was looking at.

“Yes, Dad.” The pudgy boy grinned broadly as he was pulled into a tight hug. Not too long after, Alice Longbottom woke up, and Neville was pulled into a three-way hug as the nurse darted around, trying to

perform a checkup on the two elder Longbottoms. Finally, she gave up and allowed the three to have their moment together before she interrupted them, an apologetic smile on her lips.

Harry watched for a few minutes longer, before turning around and leaving. He didn't need to see more. Whatever else was said was between Neville and his parents.

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A knock on Harry's door caused him to look up from the reports he was reading. He hadn't realized just how much work it was to rule over the entirety of the holdings of House Polairix until it had actually landed on his desk. He was just glad that Queen Xerina and Count Hiscophney were quite capable of managing their respective nations by themselves, so the only thing he had to deal with was the fallout from the battle at the Ministry.

"Come in," he shouted.

The door cracked open, admitting both of Neville's parents. They were out of the wheelchairs they had been in for the first few days while the doctors and nurses worked at restoring the muscle mass and motor functions they had lost during the years they had laid in a coma. And while they still looked a little haggard, they were looking much better than they had just a few days ago.

Harry smiled at them. He had never seen Neville so happy ever since he met him, and, by extension, he had never seen Bella so...free, either. One of the greatest burdens on her soul had been lifted with this act and Neville's forgiveness, and he was grateful to his friend for that. Neville and Bella had had a long talk the day she had woken up from the injuries she'd received down in the ruins of Azkaban. Harry didn't know any details, he just knew that the two had been locked in a room for a good two hours, and when they'd come out, both of them had looked very relieved.

Bella had only told him that she'd apologized to Neville for what she had done, but not much more. Harry cornered his friend later on and managed to wring out a little more out of Neville. He'd told Harry that

he and Bella had talked about the crimes she'd committed while she had served Voldemort, and her need to make amends. Harry had been fully prepared to deal with the potential fallout from that, as well, when Neville had surprised him. He'd told him that he'd forgiven Bella. Sure, she had done some horrible things, Neville had said, but that was the past. Nothing could be done to change it now, and everything she had done, everything she had risked in turning against Voldemort had gone a long way to making up for it.

But what had shocked Harry was Neville's parting comment, when the boy had told him that he didn't hate Bella. He didn't hate her, because she made Harry happy, and Neville was glad that his friend had found some peace in his life. He wasn't about to take that away to hold on to a grudge that would serve no purpose. Besides, Neville had admitted to Harry, he had suspected that Bella had been suffering from a form of psychosis while she was serving Voldemort; now that it was gone, she was a different person, someone he just couldn't hold accountable for the actions of a crazed mind.

That right there had told Harry one thing: Neville Longbottom would go on to be a great man. The kid was more generous, more forgiving than anyone Harry had ever met, and displayed a maturity in his decisions that most adults were sorely lacking. Most would hate Bella, despite everything she'd done. Heck, Bella hated Bella for what she'd done, but Neville had merely told her it would serve no purpose. She was good for Harry, and they both deserved a break, and that was that. Harry had been stunned, not even remembering to return Neville's wave as the boy took off to look after the Legion.

"Hey. What can I do for you?"

"Harry Potter..." Alice Longbottom smiled. "We had a long talk with Neville about what we missed. We just came by to thank you."

Harry shrugged. "I wish I could say it was nothing...but Voldemort was one annoying son-of-a—" he broke off abruptly. "Anyway, where are my manners? Please, have a seat." He gave his wand a quick wave when they had both settled in on the other side of his desk, conjuring up three cups of tea.

“We just wanted to talk to you,” Frank Longbottom said as his wife picked up her teacup. “We heard a lot from Neville. We also heard quite a bit about what happened to you lately.”

“Your parents would be proud of you, Mr. Potter,” Alice added, “Everything you’ve accomplished, every hardship you’ve fought through...even against the judgment of the wizarding world.” She chuckled. “Especially against the judgment of the wizarding world. You’re so much like James...”

“So I’m told,” Harry replied with a weary smile. He got that a lot. “I like to think, though, that most of the people I know would’ve done the same. Your son is a good friend, and a good man. You have every reason to be proud of him, as well.”

“We are,” Frank said. “Believe me, we are. I almost couldn’t believe it when he told us he was heading a secret DADA organization at school. I mean, the last time we saw him, he was a toddler!”

Alice nodded in agreement. “And you sell yourself short, Mr. Potter. Not many people, today or during the first war, would have had the guts and the strength to stand up to Lord Voldemort. It’s true, the people around you have stood up for themselves, but I do believe that is mainly because of you. This entire victory, the defeat of Voldemort, was entirely due to you. You inspire the people who follow you. You lead them by example. They’re willing to give their lives, not because they believe in their cause, but because they believe in you.”

Harry blinked, trying to digest that. “Now you’re really giving me too much credit,” he chuckled weakly. “There are a lot of people who have the strength to fight for what’s right, if given the right circumstances.”

“Then let us just be thankful that it was you who was in the right circumstances, and not someone else.”

Harry debated for a long moment whether to tell them of the prophecy. He finally decided that it was something they could do without. They

didn't need the burden of knowing just how close Neville had actually come to be in Harry's shoes. "I am," he finally told the Longbottoms. "I am grateful that it was me, because I wouldn't wish this burden on anyone else."

Alice smiled at him. "And that, Harry Potter, is what makes you a great young man."

They remained in comfortable silence for a few moments, before Harry spoke up again. "Did you give your return to the wizarding world any thought? I mean, practically all of them think I've kidnapped you for my own nefarious purposes."

The Longbottoms shared a quick look, before Alice grinned. "We would be glad to inform the public of their...misconceptions."

"Though we hear from Neville that you've made quite some headway with the new Minister, yourself," Frank commented with a knowing grin.

"Bert is a little more...sensible than the rest of the wizarding world." Harry chuckled in agreement. "His help has gone a long way to uniting all the magical creatures and bring us all together enough to fight Voldemort effectively."

"What about yourself, though?" Alice asked, looking around the sparse office curiously. "Have you thought of returning?"

Harry gave the woman a look that clearly said are you kidding me? "I don't think I'd be the most welcome person there right now. In fact, I think my popularity is at rock bottom, possibly even lower than Voldemort." He cleared his throat.

"Seriously? How can that be?" Alice was dumbfounded at his utter conviction. "I mean, you just fulfilled a decades-old prophecy, defeated the greatest dark wizard in centuries, and have united the wizarding world. Surely the people—"

“The people are idiots,” Harry cut her off abruptly. “Not to be rude, but you haven’t seen first hand how stupid they can be. Print something in the newspaper, and they believe it like it was the holy scriptures.”

“From what it sounded like, Voldemort had a surprisingly easy time discrediting you,” Alice noted.

“Yes, but that wasn’t because Voldemort was good at it. Hell, look at what Fudge made the people believe about me when he was Minister. One would almost think I ate small children for breakfast,” Harry explained darkly. “No, Voldemort played to everyone’s fears, but those fears were in place long before this whole mess began. No offense, but I’ve found out the hard way that most wizards are cowards. Whenever someone appears who seems to be able to do something they can’t, they immediately fear them. Oh sure, they did hero-worship me for a while after I defeated Voldemort the first time, but that was quickly replaced by the fear that I would replace him. And when I told them Voldemort was back at the end of my fourth year...” Harry shrugged. “Let’s just say people didn’t want to leave their comfortable little worlds and admit that Voldemort was back.”

Frank looked skeptical. “I find it hard to believe the public was so easily swayed...”

“Oh, believe me, it wasn’t hard,” Harry snorted derisively. “All it took was one allegation. Look at how quickly my supposed friends turned on me. To this day, the Weasleys, except for the twins and Ginny, resent me. Hell, even Ginny believed I was evil until the evidence stared her right in the face, and all of them have known me for years, practically grew up with me. And let’s not even get started on the Order of the Phoenix. Despite the fact that Voldemort admitted to framing me, they still believe that I’m out to replace him. So, no, I’m not all that eager to return to the wizarding world.”

Frank and Alice blinked in surprise at that. Harry spread his arms, gesturing all around him. “Here, I have people who like me, not for being the Boy-Who-Lived, not for defeating Voldemort, but for who I am. They respect me for what I can do, but they’re not afraid of me.

Here, I have friends, I have found a family, and I have found love, something I've never had in the wizarding world. Why would I leave all that behind?"

"What about closure?" Alice finally asked. "Don't you feel the need to...tie up loose ends, as it were? Even if you have already decided to remain here, aren't there a few things left to do for you in the wizarding world?"

"Not to mention," her husband added, "that you could do so much good in the world. The wizarding world could learn so much from you, not just about courage and integrity, but also about tolerance. Look at what you accomplished in so little time – you could do a whole lot more in the years to come."

Harry shook his head decisively. "While it's true that there's some things I have to deal with still, I don't think I'll return. Sure, I might be able to make a difference, but to what end? In the end, it's the people's decision. I can't force them to learn tolerance, I can't force them to stand up for what's right. That's something they have to do for themselves. Besides, if this war has taught me one thing, then it's to be selfish."

"Selfish?" Frank echoed, puzzled.

"Yes." Harry smirked knowingly. "After all the wizarding world did to me, after all they accused me of, after all the betrayal...did you really expect me to kill Voldemort for them? Please, I'm no saint." He found a perverse sense of pleasure in seeing the Longbottoms' eyes widen in surprise. "I did it for myself. I killed him in revenge for my parents, for my godfather...for threatening my wife and child. For the people who followed me."

"W-what?"

Alice glanced at her husband with a look of disbelief. "What do you mean, for the people who follow you?"

“The sorcerers of Trazkaban, the Ice people...” Harry leaned forward, taking a sip of his now-cold tea. “They went to war with Voldemort for me, without me having asked them, because they felt that it was the right thing to do. Count Hiscophney and Queen Xerina hate oppression and xenophobia and all that Voldemort stood for. They didn’t go to war for me, or because of me, but for themselves. They did it because it was the right thing to do, and I just happened to share their ideals. They threw their support behind me, respected me, and ultimately, sacrificed for me and the wizarding world. Same thing with the goblins. They didn’t have to come to the final battle, but they did. Eight hundred and seventeen goblins died to free the wizarding world from Voldemort, after all that the wizarding world did to them. Do you think wizards would’ve been so generous if the roles were reversed? I don’t think so. That is what I fight for. Not the wizarding world. Not the people who sit idly by and let children fight their battles for them, or who oppress other races, maybe not in the way Voldemort did, but in other ways. I fight for those who fight for me. That’s all.”

When Neville’s parents remained silent, Harry smirked. “Not quite as noble as you had expected me to be?”

“No...not really,” Frank finally muttered.

Harry shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t really care anymore. I’ve gotten past the point of caring what other people think of me. I had to, in order to survive,” he finished grimly.

“I supposed so,” Alice admitted. “And from what it sounds like, you have every right to be angry at the wizarding world.”

The words reminded him so much of what Hermione had told him weeks ago, when she’d tried to get him to vent the anger and betrayal he felt on her, and Harry chuckled. “Angry? No, not really. Frustrated? Yes. Infuriated? Definitely. But I came to realize that you’ve got to help yourself before you help others, and if the wizarding world doesn’t want to help itself, well...they got lucky my interests intersected with theirs, no matter how much they screwed me over.”

Alice recovered first and managed to put a slightly forced smile on her face. "Nevertheless, your parents would be proud."

Before she could say anything more, the door cracked open a bit, and Bella stuck her head in. "Harry? Can I—" the dark haired witch trailed off as she stared at the two Longbottoms, caught like a deer in a headlight.

The Longbottoms stared back with a similar expression that quickly turned to hatred, but before they could say anything, Bella quickly excused herself and closed the door. They turned around to stare at Harry, who looked back, an unspoken challenge in his eyes for them to dare say anything.

"What is she doing here?" Frank demanded.

Harry noticed the hostile look in their eyes and sighed. He and Bella had hoped that they could avoid having the Longbottoms run into the former dark witch, and she'd done a pretty good job of avoiding them for the last few days. Bound to happen, though, Harry admitted silently. It wasn't like they could keep it a secret forever. Bah, forever. A few days more would've been enough, he amended sourly.

"She's my wife," Harry told them evenly.

Both of his visitors blinked, looking at each other and then back at him in unison. It would have been comical, had the situation not been so tense. "I don't think I heard you correctly, Mr. Potter," Frank said. "I could have sworn you said that she's your wife."

"Your hearing's fine, Mr. Longbottom. Bellatrix Potter is my wife. Of, oh, around ten months now."

"Your...what?" Frank hissed. "Are you out of your mind?!"

"I'm feeling quite sane, thank you," Harry replied acerbically. He'd seen the expression that had crept up on his two houseguests' faces

a hundred times. It was the same look of disbelief and hatred that Ron Weasley gave him these days.

“What do you think you’re doing? That woman is a demon! She’s worse than the dark lord!”

“She’s my wife, and I’d appreciate it if you could keep your opinion of her to yourself.”

“She’s a twisted, evil bitch! What did she do to you? Blackmail you? Torture you?” Frank’s eyes widened in horror. “She seduced you, didn’t she! Can’t you see what she’s doing? She’s just trying to use you to-”

Harry slammed his palms on the table as he stood, his chair sliding out from under him. “That’s quite enough,” he said calmly, his face neutral. “Despite the fact that your question is unwarranted and does not deserve an answer, let me put you at ease. She has not manipulated me in any way, and she’s certainly not out to rule the world, unlike a certain evil maniac we all know who’s now dead, thanks in great part, to her.”

“She is much worse than the dark lord ever was,” Alice joined in, “while Voldemort just kills his enemies, she...she relishes their agony. She’ll torture you to the point of death, only to heal you and torture you again – look at what she did to us!”

Harry sighed. He could understand where they came from, but it was that precise attitude that had caused the wizarding world so much trouble. “Yes, I am fully aware of what she has done in the past. But are you aware of what she has done during the past year? Let me tell you, then. She has risked her life in becoming my informant within Voldemort’s ranks. She provided me with information about raids and attacks that have allowed the Ministry, the Order, or myself to prevent them from happening. She has single-handedly saved thousands of lives. And you know what? After I was thrown into Azkaban, she was fully prepared to die by my hand to atone for what she did. She taught me what I needed to learn to break out of that god-forsaken place.”

“She-“

“It’s because of her that I’m still here, still alive. She was there when the rest of the world, my so-called friends and family,” Harry spat angrily, “gave a damn about me. If it was up to them, I’d be a rotting corpse in Azkaban by now. When the whole world was prepared to lock me up as their scapegoat, she saved me. And you know what? She didn’t do it to save her own skin – she did it to save a kid who’d been wrongly condemned. Do you have any idea what she went through these last twenty years?”

“Frankly, Mr. Potter, I couldn’t care less what that...woman went through. She has inflicted enough pain and harm on the rest of us that the best place for her would be six feet underground,” Frank snarled.

“Manic Schizoaffective Disorder,” Harry said calmly.

“What?”

“It’s a form of psychosis where the individual suffers from severe mood swings, manic episodes, and epileptic symptoms. The behavior can, in extreme cases, be very violent, and the individuals affected usually lack a sense of self-fulfillment. They seek self-gratification any way they can...usually in violence,” Harry replied. Hermione had done some research into Bella’s state of mind after he’d shared his suspicions about Bella’s extreme behavior during her service to Voldemort.

“A...a mood swing?” Alice shrieked. “You call what she did to us a mood swing?!”

“And we’re supposed to just believe she had a change of heart just out of the blue?” Frank shook his head as he comforted his wife.

“Fifteen years in Azkaban will do that to you,” Harry told him dryly. “Imagine living through fifteen years of hell. I was in the presence of Dementors in my third and fourth year at Hogwarts, and just one of them managed to knock me unconscious. A dozen of them, and I

thought I was going insane. Fifteen years, and hundreds of Dementors change any person.” Ask Sirius, Harry almost added, the thought of his dead godfather sending a stab of pain through him.

“That’s exactly why we send criminals there!” Frank shouted. “That’s what they deserve!”

“And innocent children?” Harry shot back acerbically.

Frank took a deep breath and rose to his feet, pulling his wife up with him. “I can’t believe I just heard you correctly, Mr. Potter. I was wrong. Neville is wrong. The wizarding world is right about you. You’ve let the power go to your head, and now you’re defending a woman who has a history of torturing and killing others. Your parents would be ashamed of you – cavorting with a dark witch, letting her seduce you. You disgust me. I am taking my family and leaving. If I ever see you again, I will personally put an end to you.”

Harry remained seated behind his desk, leaning back in his chair casually, but underneath the table, he had his wand within reach. “Do whatever you like, Mr. Longbottom. I owe no one an explanation, and to be perfectly frank, I don’t care what you think of me. If I did, I’d still be in Azkaban and most likely dead, you’d still be in a coma or dead, and Voldemort would have control of the country.” He narrowed his eyes, glaring at the older man. “Neville is always welcome here, but as long as you show this kind of attitude for my wife, then you are not. A word of warning, though...I don’t take well to threats.”

Frank glared back at him and left the room, slamming the door behind him. Harry let out an exasperated sigh and closed his eyes, letting himself slump in his chair.

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“Didn’t go well, I take it?”

Harry’s eyes snapped open as he looked up. Narcissa was standing inside the doorway the Longbottoms had just left through, a wry look

on her face. "What gave it away?" Harry asked dryly. "The shouting, or the slamming door?"

"Actually, he almost shoved me down the stairs as he passed me," Narcissa replied, then held up a hand quickly when Harry began to rise, an angry expression on his face. "Don't. I'm all right." She walked over and sat down in one of the chairs in front of the desk.

Harry sighed and sat back down, as well. "Yeah, well, it doesn't really matter to me what they think of me, but..."

"You had hoped they'd be as forgiving as their kid?" Narcissa chuckled humorlessly. "I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you, Harry. You'll find a big difference between this new generation of yours and us old-timers. You children are much more tolerant than we'll ever be, I'm afraid. It's just the way we were raised."

Harry nodded gravely, then leaned forward. "How are you holding up? I didn't get a chance to talk to you since Draco's funeral."

"I'm...okay," she said hesitantly. "He is...was my son, and it hurts. Oh Merlin, it hurt, seeing him lying there on that slab..."

"I'm sorry," Harry began, only to be waved off.

"He chose his path. I knew full well what could happen once I left Lucius. Draco...he was always so much like his father. Ambitious, easily tempted." Narcissa managed a weak smile. "I...I probably failed him as a mother."

Harry just sat there, staring at her for a few moments, unsure of what to do. The Draco he'd known had always been a jerk, and he couldn't really imagine him as anything else. Finally, he settled on covering her hand with his. "I don't think you did," he told her. "You made some bad choices that allowed him – and you – to be influenced by Voldemort, but in the end, he was responsible for his own way in life."

"I know." Narcissa smiled at Harry. "I never really said thank you, did I? For what you did for me."

“You needed help. I was able to,” Harry shrugged. “I am...glad I did.”

“So am I.”

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“Neville, we’re leaving. Pack your things. Right now.”

The boy looked up, startled at the angry look in his father’s eyes.
“What?”

“You heard me, Neville. Pack your things. We’re leaving this place.”

“Why? I thought the doctors said-“

“Your friend is an evil maniac,” Frank hissed angrily. “I can’t believe he actually had you fooled! What did your grandmother teach you?”

“What?” Neville’s eyes were wide. “What are you talking about?”

“That...that woman!” Frank spat. “Lestrange!”

“You mean Bella?”

“You know her?”

“Well...yes.” Neville shrugged. “She’s Harry’s wife. It’s kind of hard not to know her.”

“You-“

Neville sighed as he realized what his parents’s problem was. “Look, please, just calm down and listen-“

“You knew that woman was here all this time and didn’t tell us?!”

“We knew you’d react this way, and-“

“She’s dangerous!” Alice cried. “She almost killed us!”

“She took us away from you for the last fifteen years,” Frank added.

Neville set himself. The discussion he’d had with Bella hadn’t been easy on him, but he’d come to realize a few home truths. Holding grudges for what was in the past didn’t help in looking towards the future – that was one of them. “That was a long time ago,” he began. “She’s different now.”

“No, she’s not!” Frank snarled, almost grabbing Neville by his lapels. “People like them don’t ever change! All they want is to kill and torture others for their own perverse pleasure!”

“She’s not like that, not anymore,” Neville defended, but he couldn’t really get another word off before his father slapped him.

“Has she gotten to you, too? What, is she sleeping with every goddamn kid in this castle?” Frank screamed. His wife tried to place a hand on his arm, but he shook it off. “What the hell is the matter with you, Neville? That woman put us in a coma for the last fifteen years, and you’re defending her!”

“Dad-“

“No, Neville, we’re going, right now!”

The boy frowned. His parents were mad – beyond mad, even, and he couldn’t really fault them. But couldn’t they see that it would only do harm for them to hold on to their hatred? It wasn’t as if they had to suddenly start liking Bella – Neville was far from it, himself, but they were cordial, even friendly at times. It had lifted a terrible burden from his shoulders when he’d agreed to let the past go, a burden he’d not even been aware he’d been carrying. He’d been tense every time Bella had entered the room, but now, that tension was gone, replaced by pride...in himself, that he’d managed to jump beyond his own

shadow, and at her, for managing to turn her life around. And it felt good.

“No, Dad,” he whispered.

“What?”

“I said, no, I’m not leaving, Dad.”

“What did you say?”

Neville blinked in confusion. He just knew he’d just said that clearly. “I said-“

“I heard what you said! You’re coming with us, young man, and there’ll be no discussion! With any luck, we can undo whatever brainwashing she did to you.”

“I wasn’t-“

Neville suddenly found himself being dragged along as his parents stormed out of the room towards the fireplace in the main hall. When they stopped, he finally managed to get his arm out of his father’s vise-like grip. “I wasn’t brainwashed, Dad!”

“Of course you were!” Frank told him in a tone that brooked no argument. “Why else would you be going along with the Potter boy? All this time you’ve been telling me the wizarding world’s gone mad when it’s you who’s gone mad! They are right, that Potter boy is a menace!”

“Harry isn’t a menace, Dad-“

Frank spun around, glaring at his son. “He’s gone dark! He’s bloody married to a dark witch, and the worst of them all! I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to get you to practice the dark arts, either!”

“No, Dad, listen to me,” Neville argued, standing his ground. “Harry’s not evil, and Bella’s not who she was years ago. Can’t you see? People change—”

“Damn right they do,” Frank agreed. “You changed, Neville. If I were you, I’d have killed her the first time I saw her!”

“Frank!” Alice cried in shock.

“Dammit, Dad, listen to me! I’ve had my differences with Bella, but you know what? Despite what she did to you, despite everything else she’s done in the past...it’s just that. The past. She was sick, Dad, very sick, for a long time—”

“Sick in the head is more like it—”

“Yes, Dad. Maybe Harry explained it to you, but Bella wasn’t herself, really herself when she did all those things. But ever since...ever since Harry was thrown into Azkaban, she’s been there for him, she’s helped us out a lot. In fact, I don’t think we could’ve won without her. She’s been trying to come to terms with what she’s done and atone for it all this time, Mom, Dad.”

“She is trying to come to terms with what she’s done?” Alice howled, “What about us! We’re the victims! She took fifteen years with our son away from us, and nothing can ever bring them back! You’re telling us to just forgive and forget?”

“No,” Neville shook his head. “Not to forget. I don’t think any of us can ever forget. But if you keep being so angry all the time, if you keep up hating her...it’s – it’s not good for you. I wanted to hate her for so long, you know, for what she did to you, but you know what? When it came down to it, when I had my wand pointed at her and she was ready to die? I couldn’t do it. She’s done so much to make up for the past, and there’s so much more she could do. She wasn’t herself when she did those terrible things, but she’s herself now, and the worst punishment, something she doesn’t deserve, is to live with the guilt and hate of her past. No one deserves that.”

His parents stared at him as if he'd grown a second head. "You...you...you're not our son!" Frank yelled, rearing back to slap Neville again, only to find the boy's arm blocking his swing.

"I love you, Mom, Dad. I really do. But I can't hate Bella. I can't hate her, because it's not going to do anyone any good."

"It'd sure make me feel good to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze," Frank muttered

angrily.

"Mom, Dad, can't you see? If you just keep on hating and hating forever, you'll end up just like the people we just fought against. They hate for hate's sake. I can't do that, I don't want to do that."

"We don't hate her for hate's sake, son," Alice told him quietly, "we hate her because of what she is."

"You hate her because of what she was," Neville corrected. "You haven't even given her a chance!"

"Why should we?" Frank shot back.

"Because she cured you. She brought you back to me. She healed you, developed and brewed the potion that restored both your sanity."

"And that makes it all right? The hell it does!"

"She makes Harry happy," Neville added.

"What?" His father looked at him, staring in disbelief, unable to believe what his son had just told him. "She...makes...Potter...happy?" he echoed.

"Yes. Harry's never been happy before in all the time I've known him. With all the crap he's gone through so far, he deserves to be happy," Neville explained.

“Potter? I don’t give a damn about Potter’s happiness! The damn kid corrupted my son!” Frank shouted.

Neville’s eyes narrowed. That was the exact same attitude that had landed Harry in the mess that was his life to begin with. People just saw the Boy-Who-Lived and what he could do for them, and damn the cost to Harry. He’d been used, abused, and tossed aside when convenient by the wizarding world. “You should,” Neville said quietly. “You should care about his happiness, and you know why? Because he’s my friend. He’s my family. And it’s thinking like yours that made him into who he is today, because people didn’t care about him, just what he could do for them.”

“Neville—”

“No, Dad. Please, don’t make me choose between you and Harry.” Neville turned around and walked off.

A/N: This is the end . . . finally. I know that some of you will be disappointed, but really—the story is over. Will there be a sequel? I doubt it—at least not one written by either of us. There is some good news though. Claihm Solais and I are sticking together for another story. You should be able to find it on my/our account page. Thank you to all those who read and left reviews over the years. ~Lord Silvere

Epilogue

by:

Claihmsolais

The old man slowly turned around at the sound of the door creaking open. He found himself looking at a familiar figure, one that he hadn't seen in years now. It had taken Albus Dumbledore weeks to recover from the injuries he'd taken at Voldemort's hands, and when he'd woken up, he'd found himself in St. Mungo's. After he'd recovered, the headmaster had resolved to only serve one more term as the head of Hogwarts before passing that mantle on to Minerva McGonagall. He'd gotten his wish, and bought a cozy little cottage on the coast to retire to, with the calming sounds of the waves crashing onto the shore nearby.

"What can I do for you, Harry?"

The young man was silent for a long while, and shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "I just came to...say goodbye, I guess."

Harry hadn't been in contact with anyone for years, making like a recluse in Nair'i'caix. The last Albus had heard from him was that Bella had given birth to a daughter. The old headmaster had sent him a card then, to which he'd gotten a curt note with "Thanks" in return. It had been seven years since the wizarding world had seen the last of Harry Potter, after he defeated of Voldemort.

Dumbledore suspected that Harry was still in contact with Cuthbert Mockridge, who was currently serving his second term in office – in fact, it looked like he would go on to serve a third, with the votes of

most of the magical creatures behind him. It was thanks to Mockridge, really, and, probably with Harry in the background, that the wizarding world was slowly undergoing reforms that would eventually make it a more cohesive whole. Laws prohibiting the rights of magical creatures were abolished and replaced with fair contracts, and while the ban on some of the more dangerous magical creatures remained, it wasn't uncommon these days to see goblins walking around Diagon Alley, or to see squibs, goblins, and centaurs enjoying a drink together in the Leaky Cauldron.

"Goodbye?" Albus mused. "A strange thing to say when you have already been gone for years."

"I just...Bella and I are getting ready to cut all ties with the wizarding world. We're finally ready," Harry said. "I...I sort of felt I owed it to you to check up on you before we left for good."

Dumbledore sighed. He'd been practicing for this particular conversation for years. By now, he even had memorized exactly what he was going to say. "I'm glad you did, Harry...I owe you an apology for what I have put you through, but I know that it will never be enough."

"Yeah...I was...pretty bitter for a while, there," Harry admitted. "You tried to do what you always do, manipulate people. You did it for the good of the world, but that still doesn't make it right."

"I wasn't referring to that, Harry, though I am also terribly sorry for that." A slight twinkle returned to the ancient wizard's eyes. "I failed you as my charge when you needed me most. I failed to believe in you, failed to investigate further, because I was so blinded by the fear of everyone around you. I have over a century of experience in dealing with people, and I let others control my opinion. I didn't believe in you, despite knowing everything about you, everything you had done."

"You're not the only one," Harry muttered bitterly. The Weasleys, with the exception of Molly and Ron, had come around to seeing the colossal mistake they had made. Of course, the twins did everything

they could to rub their faces in it and get some payback for Harry, knowing that Harry would never go to get it himself. The pain from their betrayal had kept him far away from the Weasleys ever since the last day of battle, with the exception of the twins.

Ginny had tried to apologize and actually prostrated herself before him, begging him to kill her or torture her for her betrayal, but he couldn't bear to watch her like that, and had left. He didn't know how to deal with her, didn't want to deal with her. He had his own demons to deal with.

His anger at her for almost having killed Bella and their child had stood between them for a long time, until he was finally able to let it rest. Last he heard, Hermione and Ginny had gotten around to getting therapy for both of them to deal with the guilt. While a lot of people in the wizarding world were quick to blame Ginny and label her as a traitor for her actions under Voldemort's influence, their protests had died a quick death when more and more people were discovered to have been under a spell or potion of some sort.

The wizarding world had gotten a good, long look at itself, and the sight hadn't been pretty, because, as many unwitting traitors there were, there were even more who had voluntarily served Voldemort.

Eventually, over the years, Harry had forgiven Ginny, and they had made small steps to a tentative friendship again, much like he had with Hermione, though their relationship was still very strained and uncomfortable. He had, in fact, taken Hermione aside one day and screamed, yelled, and cried at her for all he'd been through. The brunette girl had just stood there, taken it, and comforted him when he'd broken down. Unlike with Ginny, their friendship was still a little skittish, but it was well on the road to recovery.

It certainly helped that Hermione and Bella seemed to get along rather well, but their contact had been very infrequent ever since Harry and Bella had sequestered themselves away from the wizarding world a few weeks after Voldemort's death.

The only person who'd remained with them, to their great surprise, had been Neville. The day he'd had an argument with his parents

about Bella was the day they had given him a choice: leave with them, or stay and be disowned.

He'd chosen to stay. Harry knew the decision had hurt Neville tremendously, and had more than once tried to convince his friend to go and return to his parents. Neville just shook his head every time Harry brought it up, and told him that he'd been more of a family to him than his parents in the last few years. Neville was determined that what had happened to Harry before, when he was deserted by everyone he knew, never happened again. Harry took a guilty pleasure from knowing that Neville had chosen to side with him over his parents, though he took great care to never let it show. Even to this day, Neville's parents refused to talk to him.

"I suppose so," Dumbledore agreed. "But I have been the catalyst for it. Had I voiced my concerns, or believed in you, then you would not have been condemned so quickly, by so many."

"Yeah." Harry sighed. "You know what? You're right. I got screwed over big time. By you, by my supposed friends, by the wizarding world in general. That's why I wasn't a part of it for the last few years."

"And now?" Dumbledore asked, curious.

"Now...let's just say we're preparing to vanish completely."

"What about your daughter?"

"My daughter is exactly the reason we're going away for good," Harry replied. "Do you have any idea what she'd go through if the wizarding world found out? If I had it bad, she'll have it a hundred times worse – 'daughter of dark lord Potter,' 'second Bellatrix Lestrange,' 'dark mistress in the making.' Frankly, I got tired of that crap years ago."

Dumbledore nodded. "I can understand that." He turned around to look out the window again. "Harry...you are a great man. No matter what the rest of the world says. I know I probably don't have any right

to tell you anymore, but your parents would be proud. I'm certain of that."

"You know what's funny?" Harry snorted as he stepped forward to stand next to the old headmaster. "I'm not as great as you think. In fact, Neville is by far the better man than I am."

"How so?" Dumbledore arched a curious eyebrow.

"You taught me to care only for those closest to me. The wizarding world taught me to beware of betrayal. Sirius taught me how to care, Bella how to love. Voldemort taught me how to hate. But only Neville taught me how to forgive."

Before Dumbledore could ask, Harry explained. As he talked, the old headmaster could see Harry's posture relax, his hands comfortably clasped behind his back as he stared out to sea. "A few days after Voldemort died, Neville had a long talk with Bella. And you know what? He forgave her. She took away his parents, tortured countless people, committed horrible crimes. I never held it against her, but then again, I love her. Heh. Love blinds, they say. Neville...he had every reason to hate her, but he didn't. And you know why? Because, he said, it's in the past, and we can't change it." Most of the time, Harry amended silently. The instance they used a time-turner to save Sirius and Buckbeak came to mind.

"What's more," Harry continued, "he said that she isn't who she was back then. The insane Bella, the one who served Voldemort...that was someone he could hate. Not the Bella who risked everything to be my informant, and risked her life in helping us in the war against Voldemort. And mostly...because I was happy with her. Do you have any idea what that meant to me?" Harry turned to look at Dumbledore, and the ancient wizard saw the unshed tears in his eyes. "For the first god-damn time in my life, with the exception of Sirius and Bella, someone actually was willing to give up something for me. He cares more about me as a friend than he does a grudge against Bella. And you know what? When his parents woke up, and they found out, they were ready to disown him and throw their lot with the 'Harry Potter has gone dark!' crowd. He told them off. He told them to let things

rest in the past. They wouldn't hear any of it and left...and Neville's been staying with us ever since."

Dumbledore could only stare back in shock. This was all news to him. While he had heard that Neville had remained with Harry, he had never suspected something like this to be the reason. "I-I don't know what to say," he admitted.

"And you know what? Neville forgave his parents, too. What did he say again? 'Life's too short to be wasting it on grudges and hatred.' That kid's had it almost as bad as I have, and he's...he forgives everyone, and he's happy because of it. He's happy because he doesn't carry around the burden of hate. And he's right. I've hated the wizarding world long enough. I...wasn't in a good place for a long time. I was bitter, I hated all of you, hated the wizarding world for what they did to me, for condemning the one person who'd ever bothered to be there for me. They made a mistake, but there's nothing that can be done about it now. It's in the past – history, just like Voldemort. Just like what Bella did. I understand that forgiveness won't be given anytime soon...if ever, but holding grudges and hating people over it? It seems...so pointless now. Am I still angry at you all for what you did? Not really. Bitter? Perhaps a bit. But I no longer hate you. I...I came to tell you that, before I left for good. I didn't want to leave with you thinking that I hated you, because, for better or for worse, you were one of the few people in my life who bothered to care."

"Harry..." Dumbledore sighed heavily, turning his head to look out to sea, as well. "Won't you reconsider? If you remained with the wizarding world—"

"No, Professor," Harry said, using the respectful title for the first time in years. "I can't stay. For my daughter's sake. I don't want her growing up in the circus that was my life."

"You could have made such a difference, you know," Dumbledore said. "The people who know you, who've followed you, would be quick to attest to that. You were the only one of us throughout all of this to remain true to your ideals. Your...your courage, your

determination, your will to never give up. The way you stood up, against impossible odds, because it was the right thing to do...all of that is something that has been lacking in the wizarding world for years. If...if only we'd had some of those traits, then Voldemort would never have gotten as far as he had. He would never have driven us to the brink of extinction."

"They have that. They all do...Neville, Fred, George, Luna, everyone in the Legion. Even Hermione now. They just..." Harry shrugged. "They just needed someone they could follow, I guess."

"You led them by example, Harry," Dumbledore insisted. "You showed them the best we could be."

Harry snorted at the praise. "I also showed them the worst they could be. Like I said, I wasn't in a good place, myself, for a long time."

"Severus spoke very highly of your leadership and determination these past few years. He insisted that despite any...bad times, your will was what pulled you through. Your unwillingness to surrender."

"Praise from Snape?" Harry chortled. "Somehow, I don't quite believe that."

"Well, he didn't say it outright, of course," Dumbledore chuckled. "But I know him well enough to be able to read between the lines, as it were. And you are right, of course, they all have the ability to be good people, but the fact is that it was you who brought them together, who brought it out of them. It's fortunate that the old breed is dying out. You youngsters seem better suited for this world, a free world, where every creature is equal, and evil is immediately stood up to."

"Please, don't get all corny on me."

"Have you visited Minerva yet?" Dumbledore asked after a moment of silence.

“No. I didn’t plan on it, either, considering her reaction to me the last time I saw her.”

“Rest assured, Harry, after she got the full story, she was mortified at her behavior. Surprisingly, she was tested positive for a slightly mind-altering potion. At Severus’s suggestion, we had everyone tested for it, but only Minerva and Arthur Weasley were found positive.”

Harry shook his head moodily. “Those two did enough damage as it is.”

“True. However, I do know that Minerva has been looking for a chance to apologize to you. It would really ease her mind.”

Harry shrugged. “Sure. Since I’m on a forgive-and-forget trip, anyway.”

“Thank you, Harry. She has been having a hard time lately. The war severely depleted our ranks of experienced wizards, and worst, most of the teachers you knew retired shortly after the end of the war. Those that weren’t killed at the Ministry, that is.”

“So that’s why you mentioned her. Should’ve known there was a hidden agenda.”

Dumbledore inclined his head, conceding the point. “You could do a lot of good at Hogwarts, Harry. You have so much to teach, so much we could learn from that would make us all better people. You could teach the children to do what’s right and not what’s easy.”

“No. And believe me, I’m not saying no for myself, I’m saying no because of my wife and daughter. Despite the fact that Bella got a full pardon from Minister Mockridge and we all got plastered with Orders of the Merlin, the public isn’t exactly fond of her. Heck, the public isn’t fond of me, either. Can you imagine what they’d do to my daughter?”

Dumbledore considered that for a moment, then realized that Harry was probably right. While the children and young adults – most of

whom were people Harry had gone to school with, and many of whom had been part of Potter's Legion – wouldn't have a problem with Harry and his family, the older generations most likely would. "That is true. I cannot ask you to give up your daughter's welfare. But please, at least consider it," he pleaded. "There is so much good you could do."

Harry rolled his eyes. Neville, Bella, and Hermione had been trying to convince him of the exact same thing. His empire didn't really need him. The Ice People and the Trazkabanian sorcerers had governed themselves for the last few centuries without any problems.

Neville, Hermione, Fred, and George had been trying to convince him to return to the wizarding world and come out of his hermit-like reclusion. Even Bella agreed to an extent, telling him that he could do much good out there, teaching the wizarding world to stand up for itself so that another Voldemort would never again rise up. He had to admit, he was tempted...if simply by the fact that it would give him something to do. But the fact that the public would be all over his daughter like hungry cats over fish sausage stopped him cold in his tracks, and once he brought up that particular argument, none of the others could find a way to refute him.

"You wouldn't believe how many times I heard that during the last few years," Harry muttered. Unfortunately for him, Hermione and the twins had come up with a solution to that problem recently. Without Harry's knowledge, they had contacted Cuthbert Mockridge and the goblins, and asked them to set up an alternate identity for Harry's entire family. The whole idea, as Hermione had explained a few weeks ago when the trio had presented him with the option, was to allow him, Bella, and his daughter to walk the streets without being bothered by other people, after putting on a specialized glamour spell. They would even have the correct credentials, thanks to Mockridge and the goblins. Hermione told him she had gotten the idea from a muggle concept known as "witness protection." Harry still wasn't sure what he wanted to do, but everyone he knew was urging him to return.

"I'll think about it," he finally said.

Dumbledore nodded. "So, what has become of the Rod of Dominion?"

Harry eyed him curiously, though the ancient wizard could pick out the carefully-hidden suspicion lurking beneath. "Let's say it's gone, and hopefully gone for good. Since there aren't many warlocks around, I think that'll be that."

"It's destroyed, then?"

Harry paused for a moment. "Lost in space, is more like it," he said, before turning around and leaving the room. Dumbledore didn't need to know that, after years of research, he, Bella, and Hermione had found a way to destroy the staff. They were pretty sure that the original creator had known about it, but since it involved using up so much magic that whoever cast the spell would end up practically powerless, it was a safe bet that it had been quickly discarded by the earlier lords of Polairix. Now the Rod of Dominion was gone, and Harry was an ordinary wizard once more, all trace of his warlock powers gone. He paused inside the doorframe for a moment.

"Merlin's blessings upon you, Professor Dumbledore."

The ancient wizard turned around and smiled into his beard, repeating the ancient phrase. "Merlin's blessings upon you, Harry Potter."

A knock at her door caused Minerva McGonagall to look up. "Enter," she said, straightening the glasses on her nose. The door to the headmaster's office of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry creaked open, and in walked the last person she had ever expected to see.

Harry Potter.

THE END

To the readers: I'm hoping I managed to convey the original sense of the story as it was started by Lord Silver, and I'd like to thank you -

and him - for your support. I have done my best to tell a story with a moral at the end, and I apologize to anyone who felt that the story and my depiction of it was too simplistic, too two-dimensional, but keep in mind, this is a story, and stories are meant to teach. If I wanted things to be realistic, I'd point you over to politics, if you want shades of grey. The sad truth is, the world, for all its wonder, is also filled with a lot of unnecessary hate and anger, and over- and under-reactions to it. Shades of grey are reality, but they don't really teach you much. I felt that the moral of the story would be better served if I showed both sides of the coin, and let the readers draw their own conclusions. In the end, it's like Alec Guiness said as Obi-Wan Kenobi: it all depends on your point of view. Compromises are a fact of life. But all of that aside, we also have to keep in mind one thing: this story is entertainment. As much as I would like for it to teach, I would also like for it to entertain you, the readers, and usually, that is done through conflict. There is a reason why stories depicting complete utopias are usually quite short, and that is because of a lack of conflict, and conflict can't always happen in shades of grey. I hope that, despite all, you did enjoy the story, and if you did, then I, too, will have some sense of fulfillment. Thank you for reading.

- Claihm Solais